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Population, food security, nutrition and
sustainable development

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

Population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development

Priests for Life welcomes the attention of the 54th Commission on Population and Development to the critical role of food security and nutrition in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We believe that the world we want for 2030 is one in which every human being is valued for her or his innate worth and recognizes that human dignity is the foundation of policies that liberate countries and, most importantly, people from poverty.

It has become widely accepted that access to nutrition is critical throughout the life cycle but is most urgent during 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 negatively impacting their own health and ultimately negatively impacting development.

Sustainable Development Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture, recognizes that food security and nutrition are fundamental for sustainable development. Targets identify the critical need to ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round and seek to end all forms of malnutrition, including by achieving agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, all while addressing the nutritional needs of adolescent girls and pregnant and lactating women.

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019 states that progress in nutrition is needed as the number of people suffering from hunger has been on the rise since 2014 with an estimated 821 million people undernourished in 2017, the same number as in 2010. The report indicates that the prevalence of undernourishment has remained virtually unchanged in the past three years at a level slightly below 11 per cent.

The report finds that 149 million children under 5 years of age—22 per cent of the global under-5 population—were still chronically undernourished in 2018 with three quarters of those children living in Southern Asia (39 per cent) or sub-Saharan Africa (36 per cent).

It reports that in 2018, 49 million children under 5 years of age—7.3 per cent of the global under-5 population suffered from acute undernutrition, or wasting, generally caused by limited nutrient intake or infection. Over half of children with wasting live in Southern Asia and the global wasting rate in 2018 remained well above the 5 per cent global target for 2025 and the 3 per cent target for 2030.

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019 concludes that more intensive efforts are needed to meet the target of reducing the number of stunted children to 100 million by 2025 and 83 million by 2030.

Priests for Life strongly believes that the elimination of malnutrition during the first 1,000 days of life, and the provision of nutrition for all women and adolescents of child-bearing age, will not only save the lives of women and children and contribute to their well-being, but will improve the economies of countries. Healthy individuals and families are equipped with the stamina necessary for productive and sustainable agriculture, to attend school, to receive training in job skills, to 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 the 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.

Of particular concern, women affected by stunting give birth to children who are also likely to be afflicted by this preventable condition, perpetuating the cycle of malnutrition and poverty. The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development also recognized the need to strengthen food, nutrition and agricultural policies and programmes, especially for women and girls who it recognized were victims of discrimination through all stages of life, including the earliest stages of life, in the womb.

The Programme of Action not only called upon governments to work to stop the practice of prenatal sex selection which leads to the death of millions of girls but warned that son preference also impacts the access of girl children to food. It called upon governments to promote equal treatment of girls and boys, including access to nutrition.

Adequate nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life saves the lives of women and children and improves the prosperity of a country. The Lancet's series of reports on Maternal and Child Nutrition first brought attention to this critical window of opportunity with an urgent plea to governments to make nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life, and for all women of child-bearing age, the centre of the new development goals.

The Lancet report "Maternal and Child Nutrition: Building momentum for impact" stated that evidence provided in the Maternal and Child Nutrition Series strengthened the case for a continued focus on the first 1,000 days. It explained that investments within this window can help meet crucial goals, namely the prevention of undernutrition, overweight, and poor child development outcomes.

This unique window of opportunity not only can improve the life and health outcomes of the unborn child for her or his lifetime, especially if the mother has had access to nutrition prior to the start of pregnancy, but the mother's health is also improved with a greater opportunity for a healthy pregnancy and childbirth while maternal, infant and child mortality are reduced.

The Lancet report entitled *Only collective action will end undernutrition* emphasized the importance of preparing adolescents and women of reproductive age for pregnancy and placing this urgency at the centre of the post 2015 agenda. It explained that women and girls are at the heart of this message as the bearers and carers of children, that their health and economic potential are entwined with that of future generations and that unless girls grow well in early childhood and adolescence and enter into motherhood well nourished, are supported during pregnancy and empowered to breastfeed and provide good food for their babies and toddlers, the intergenerational cycle of undernutrition will not be broken.

In addition, the Lancet report stated that undernutrition cripples global economic growth and development, and that future global prosperity and security are closely linked with our ability to respond adequately to this urgent challenge. It stated that estimates for Africa and Asia suggest that up to 11 per cent of national economic productivity is lost to undernutrition.

Priests for Life supports programs and policies, along with the requisite funding, that seek to provide food security and nutrition, including micronutrients, for pregnant women and lactating mothers during the first 1000 days of life from

conception to the second birthday and for all women and adolescents of reproductive age.

When women of child-bearing age are well nourished, they are healthier and better able to provide nourishment for the child in the womb when they conceive, and to make nutritious food choices for their child under age two—all essential to ensuring healthy physical and cognitive development. When children thrive, they are empowered to reach their potential, to go to school and become healthy adults who are better equipped to make meaningful contributions to their families, society, and country.
