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Population, education 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

Priests for Life believes that education is critical for all and can liberate individuals and countries from poverty. The attention of the Commission on Population and Development on improvements to education and training and on access to these life-changing opportunities as a way to improve sustainable development is welcoming, but Priests for Life cautions that access alone will not ensure learning success.

The ability to process and benefit from education and training requires a cognitive ability that begins to be formed before birth in what is a preparation for education. Most newborn babies are born with about 100 billion brain cells, called neurons. Throughout pregnancy, the developing brain grows at an average rate of 250,000 neurons per minute.

By six weeks gestation, the brain and nervous system of the unborn child have begun to develop with millions of neurons. By the end of the second trimester, the brain stem is almost entirely developed and controls bodily functions such as thumb sucking and swallowing. The nervous system can detect loud noises outside the womb causing the baby to startle and she or he begins to identify the sound of the mother's voice. During the third trimester, the brain nearly triples in size. If development has been healthy, the baby emerges with all the neurons she or he will ever have, 100 billion.

It is well established that the critical 1,000-day window from conception to the second birthday not only lays the foundation for cognitive development but, in turn, for the future ability to learn and earn and contribute to the sustainable development of communities and countries.

A child's future success in education and employment is affected by her or his mother's nutrition, health and environment, before and during pregnancy. The building of a healthy brain requires foods containing folic acid, iron, zinc, iodine, protein, and fatty acids. If one or more are missing, a baby is at risk for birth defects, cognitive deficits, and developmental delays. Access to nutrition during women's child-bearing years, including preconception, is necessary not only for women's health and empowerment but for future generations who can be freed from the cycle of malnutrition and stunted growth.

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. It reports 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 also reports that one in seven live births, or 20.5 million (14.6 percent) babies globally, suffered from low birthweight in 2015. Low birthweight newborns 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 reduces stunted growth, wasting, and malnutrition which helps to improve the economies of countries. When women of child-bearing age are well-nourished, they are healthier and better able to provide nourishment for their preborn children. They are better able to make nutritious food choices for themselves and their young children; all essential to ensuring healthy physical and cognitive development leading to the ability to attend and thrive in school.

Healthy children who are able to attend school 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, is associated with poor cognitive development and has a potential negative impact on a country's sustainable development. Children who suffer from stunted growth often become adults who suffer from diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease, conditions that often impede earning capacity and result in lower incomes.

Preborn children who are malnourished are not only at the greatest risk of stunted growth but their impaired brain development impacts the ability to learn resulting in a negative impact on sustainable development. It is imperative for sustainable development that all are taught how to best ensure that the next generation develops in a healthy and secure prenatal environment. Women of child-bearing age need to learn about nutritious food choices for their own health and that of their future children. They need to know that exposure to certain environmental risks negatively impact their health and that of their children, before and after birth.

UNICEF asks and answers in *Early Moments Matter for Every Child: What's the most important thing children have? It's their brains.* It issues a serious exhortation: The first 1,000 days can shape a child's future. We have one chance to get it right.

Priests for Life implores the Commission on Population and Development to take steps to reduce and ultimately eliminate the negative impact of malnutrition and exposure to environmental risks during the critical period of the first 1,000 days of life, from conception to the second birthday. Education, sustainable development and the very future of the human family depend on the protection and care of all its members during all stages of the life cycle, beginning at the earliest critical moments in the womb.