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Keynote Address:

“Population, Environment and Climate Change”

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Kuala Lumpur

Yang Berhormat Senator Heng Seai Kie,

Deputy Minister for Women, Family and Community Development

Yang Berbahagia Dato' Hajah Aminah Abdul Rahman,

Director General of the National Population and Family Development Board

Distinguished guests,

Members of the media,

Ladies and gentlemen:

Good morning to you all. It is a pleasure, once again, to be with the National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB), UNFPA's long time partner. I am honoured to be provided with this opportunity to give the keynote address at this crucial event linking population, environment and climate change, to commemorate World Population Day 2010 which was yesterday.

The theme of this year's World Population Day is "everyone counts". This theme seeks to simultaneously highlight the 2010 population and housing census, the importance of data and its analysis for development, and UNFPA's lead role on population and development issues. I understand that Malaysia is also conducting its 2010 Population and Housing Census, which was officially launched last week on 6 July 2010.

The theme "everyone counts" highlights the compelling stories that numbers tell us about people. People are affected by climate change. People need to adapt to it. And only people and the policies they support or the actions they take can stop or reverse its negative consequences. Climate change is not just about technology but a human problem brought about by human activity.

The damage done to the environment by modern society has very inequitable consequences for different countries and groups of people. While the carbon footprint of the poorest billion people on earth is a mere 3 per cent of the world's total carbon footprint, it is the poor who will bear a disproportionate burden of the consequences of our changing climate.

Both the ICPD Programme of Action as well as Agenda 21 adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development affirmed the complex relationship between population dynamics and the environment, and the importance of this relationship for the management of our natural resources and sustainable development. These challenges were

further reaffirmed in the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document.

The impact and interaction of population dynamics with climate change is most evident in the poorest countries where population growth is very high and where resources, including technological assets, for mitigation and adaptation, are least available. In such contexts, the prospects for economic growth and development are also very challenging because of a number of factors, including institutional weaknesses. The link between population growth and climate change suggests that slowing and stabilizing the rate of population growth may give such countries time to take climate change adaptation and mitigation measures, while allowing for the greater protection of the environment through measures such as conserving fresh water, introducing better farming methods and providing incentives to encourage sustainable development practices. However, it should be cautioned that a high population is not necessarily synonymous with high-energy consumption. Indeed, a more effective response to climate change is to control consumption and wastage in rich countries and population groups, rather than to control birth rates.

For both developed and developing countries, the interplay of its population and the economic activities undertaken by them leads to varying levels of greenhouse gas emissions. Population size, its growth rate, composition and distribution are however only one set of variables in this complex relationship, and in many cases not the most dominant. As stated in the ICPD Programme of Action, ecological problems, such as global climate change, largely driven by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, are adding to threats to the well-being of future generations. There is an emerging global consensus on the need for increased international cooperation with regard to population issues in the context of sustainable development, for which Agenda 21(1) provides a framework. Much has been achieved in this respect, but more needs to be done. Climate change is bound to have significant impacts on socio-economic variables such as standards of living and health as well as population dynamics such as migration, urbanization, changes in the age structure of the population as well as its composition. These impacts in turn have potential implications for climate change and environmental sustainability. Unmanaged and unregulated urbanization, for instance, very often tends to outpace the development of infrastructure and environmental safeguards leading to high pollution and carbon dioxide emissions which negatively impact on climate change. Shifts in the population's age structure may also have important effects on resource demand.

Demographic factors, combined with poverty and lack of access to resources for some population groups and excessive consumption and wasteful production patterns among other population groups cause or exacerbate problems of environmental degradation, resource depletion, and climate change, and ultimately inhibit sustainable development. Indeed, both the widening gaps in the patterns of consumption and production between rich and poor countries and between communities within countries, as well as social inequities and imbalances in the access to social and economic opportunities at the national, regional and global levels have been identified as closely associated with environmental degradation and unsustainable natural resource use which can perpetuate the cycle of poverty. The combined effect of population growth and climate change is also likely to produce shortages that result in the exploitation of environmentally sensitive areas such as hill-slopes, wet-lands, coastal areas and flood plains. In addition, global warming can pose a threat to public health. It is important, therefore, that policies dealing with climate change take into account their broader implications for population dynamics and socio-economic development.

UNFPA programme interventions in the area of population and sustainable development selectively focus on areas where the agency's comparative advantage and value-added are strongest. Our policy and programme guidance prioritizes those countries and geographical areas which are experiencing the most acute population and environmental problems and where activities and projects can provide the most immediate and greatest positive effect on the most vulnerable population groups, particularly women, young people and the poor. In the case of climate change, relevant strategies include those that mitigate the negative effects of climate change on population dynamics, addressing issues such as migration, population size, its age structure and composition, and the socioeconomic impacts of climate change, especially in the poorest countries that are least able to adapt.

Countries need to invest in renewable energy, in securing clean water supplies, in better roads and communication channels, not only for environmental and other policy reasons but because these investments will also benefit specific population groups such as women and girls. Helping women to make their own decisions about family size will protect their health, make their lives easier and help place their families, communities and countries on a sustainable path to development – this will also ensure lower greenhouse-gas emissions in the long run.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During the past half century, rapid population growth and industrialization have led to a rapid rise in greenhouse gas emissions. We have now reached a point where humanity is

approaching the brink of disaster. We, therefore, have no option but to change both our policies and behavior.

Population issues are critical to understanding climate change and its consequences. But in global conversations and modeling exercises, the impact of population on greenhouse gas emissions has often been discussed simplistically or not at all. Recent research and analysis shows that the relationship is complex, and that there is an urgent need to deepen our understanding of this relationship and the interaction between population dynamics and climate change.

Overall, climate change is not just an issue of energy or the environment; it is also a moral issue and one of justice and equity which profoundly effects people and different population groups in a variety of different ways. All nations and people have the right to development. But all countries should be challenged to develop in ways that are socially equitable and environmentally sound to achieve "climate justice", to use a term currently in fashion.

Thank you for your attention.