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Development in an Overcrowded World

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Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you very much for giving me an opportunity to address this
important forum on population and development.

The United Nations University (UNU) is an expression of the
importance attached by the General Assembly to the role of intellectual

reason and scientific investigation to the alleviation of global problems of human survival, development, and welfare. Population is perhaps the most intimate of all the forces that shape human society. In its very intimacy, it is susceptible to much heat and emotion, and can often be resistant to the cold eye of impartiality.

Let me try, in the brief time allotted to me, to look at the issues of population and development from the viewpoint of the broad goals of the UNU today, and some of its efforts to date. At the UNU, we have believed from the outset that the highest values of science and technology are to push back ignorance and use knowledge to relieve suffering.

When all is said and done here in Cairo, we will undoubtedly have reinforced the reality that there is no magic answer to problems of population. Population is an infinitely complicated, multidimensional, multidisciplinary problem which reaches into all corners of the development agenda. Against this backdrop, efforts to mobilize the global scientific community take on particular significance.

It is heartening to note that, due to the efforts of many nations and many international agencies, the global rate of population growth has been declining over the last quarter-century. But the increase in absolute numbers continues at an inexorable pace, and one should also note that those numbers are straining the weakest and most vulnerable thread in the global human fabric.

Every year now, the world's population increases by more than 90 million. It is expected that the population will increase by a billion per decade into the next century. Ninety five percent of this increase

will take place in some of the poorest parts of the world.

From these cold facts, a number of social, economic, historical, cultural, and intergenerational indications arise, all of them requiring the rationality and wisdom that the international scientific and scholarly communities might impart. If the global society is to enjoy the kind of sustained growth which will bring a rough measure of equity to its various peoples, then population will clearly be a major factor.

The growing numbers of human beings who will inhabit our world will certainly add to the causes of economic underdevelopment, political instability and environmental degradation.

The UNU has approached these issues from various angles. Hunger and poverty has been on the UNU's research agenda since the institution's establishment in 1975, and has focused on the poorest billion - those living in persistent insecurity and want. UNU research led by Professor Amartya Sen of Harvard University has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the problem of population and hunger. It is becoming increasingly clear that the solution to hunger and poverty is essentially one of political will. The alleviation and eradication of hunger problems and managing population growth requires a global consensus, similar to that achieved in 1992, in Rio de Janeiro on the environment. From the hunger and poverty entry point, the UNU extended its research into questions of quality of life, food and nutrition, and women and development. In the Tokyo Declaration issued at the end of the Meeting of Eminent Persons on Population and Development held at the UNU Headquarters in Tokyo last January, it was stated that a central issue in attaining a sustainable population growth is the improvement of women's position in society in general .

More recently, the UNU has begun engaging the international scientific and scholarly community in a new effort on population and sustainable development under its Agenda 21 programme.

This includes a strong emphasis on the environmental impacts of global growth in population and economic development. The connection between the environment and our present deliberations here in Cairo is clear and logical: Unless we begin to learn to take better care of the planet's environment today, we will be unable to accommodate the developmental needs of the global community in the future.

Over the next three decades or so, the world's land, forests, and other natural resources will come under increasing pressure with the addition of three billion people who will require food, education, housing, and jobs. For the poor countries, the challenge of sustainable development implies the difficult task of providing basic human necessities, stabilizing populations, and stimulating a level of economic development that can alleviate poverty, all while conserving natural resources essential to future growth. The newly industrializing countries also face the challenge of providing models to achieve rapid economic development without creating environmental problems on the scale experienced by the industrialized countries in the past.

The UNU Agenda 21 programme aims to generate the knowledge and skills needed to help understand and manage the highly complex, dynamic, and often nonlinear systems underlying the vast transition towards sustainable development which our future will demand.

With this agenda in mind, the UNU has begun mobilizing its

multidisciplinary, international network of scholars. One of the UNU's key areas of focus which has particular meaning to our debate here in Cairo comes under the heading "econestructuring". This embraces the vast set of changes required to bring the global society into the transition towards equity and sustainability. It is concerned with consumption patterns, demographic distribution policies, energy use, and social and technological change. The focus is on human activities, and thus population is a central concern.

Parallel to the concern over population growth and sustainable development is population distribution and concentration. This has also emerged as a recent focus of UNU research in the context of migration and urbanization. At the beginning of this century the world boasted only eleven metropolitan cities of over one million inhabitants, most of them located in industrialized countries. By the end of this century we can expect 400 cities with a population of a million or more. Moreover, three-quarters of those cities will be located in the developing world and it is estimated that the urban sector will absorb virtually all of the increase in population between now and the year 2025.

The emergence of mega-cities is, therefore, of particular concern for the future. The rapid growth of human settlements in an over-dense environment, with severe socio-economic consequences to the human condition, presents major challenges to current and future policy planners.

Indeed, this issue will be reflected beyond the present conference to be a key subject of debate in the HABITAT II conference, the City Summit, in Istanbul two years from now.

Similarly, migration in its various forms, such as rural to

urban, international labour, economic and political refugees crossing national borders, is having an impact that is increasingly of global concern.

All of the above issues raise the question of the form of global governance that will be demanded by an increasingly interdependent world with double its present population. Governance is a complex set of values, norms, processes, and institutions by which society manages its development and resolves conflict. The UNU is developing a framework to merge the perspectives of the many actors who will play a role in future governance - bringing together the expertise of natural science, law, economics, engineering, and political science. It can do so while taking into account local, national, and regional realities, all within a global context.

It is my hope that all of those here today can contribute in some way to the international partnership and consensus that will be required to effectively and safely manage the pressing global issues of population and sustainable development before us .

The United Nations University stands ready to contribute to address these issues of fundamental importance to future generations.

Thank you very much.

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