

## CONTRIBUTION OF THE 55TH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT TO THE 2022 HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

### Introduction

The special theme of the 55th session of the Commission on Population and Development, held from 25 to 29 April 2022, was “Population and sustainable development, in particular sustained and inclusive economic growth”. This note highlights some key findings from the session that are relevant to discussions at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, to be held in July 2022. These messages are drawn from the resolution on the special theme that was adopted by the Commission, from reports of the Secretary-General prepared for the annual session, and from statements made by Member States and invited speakers as well as intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

The Commission also held a dedicated multi-stakeholder panel on the contribution of key population and development issues to the main theme of ECOSOC, “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The panel examined how the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) could contribute to pandemic recovery and to advancing the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 4 (education) and SDG 5 (gender equality), both of which will be reviewed at the HLPF this year. In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic had eroded gains made in recent decades towards the eradication of poverty and hunger, and towards achieving universal access to health care and education. Greater efforts were needed to end gender-based violence and child marriages, which had surged during the pandemic in many countries, and to prioritize access to safe, affordable and effective means of family planning, particularly among women and girls. Building back better from the pandemic also meant addressing structural inequalities, including those related to gender, and ensuring that all segments of society, especially adolescents and youth, had a role in policy and programme formulation that concerned them and their future. The panel highlighted the need for integration of issues related to population and development in the post-pandemic recovery and in national development planning, as well as into Voluntary National Reviews of progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. Panellists stressed the importance of cooperation, leadership, and commitments of multiple stakeholders. They also provided insights into how the ECOSOC functional commissions, in particular the Statistical Commission and the Commission on Population and Development, could work more closely together to improve the evidence base for monitoring progress toward the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda and to strengthen the statistical capacity of countries, particularly in the global South.

**(a) Progress, experience, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17 from the vantage point of the Commission on Population and**

**Development, bearing in mind the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interlinkages across the SDGs and targets, including policy implications of their synergies and trade-offs**

Despite progress towards universal primary and secondary education worldwide (SDG 4), all schooling has been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with an estimated two thirds of students affected by partial or full school closures.

The pandemic may have exacerbated the gender gap (SDG 5) along several dimensions. Women represent 70 per cent of the health and social sector workforce globally. In addition, since most housework and direct care are carried out by women, school closures to prevent transmission of the virus increased the burden on women and limited their access to economic opportunities in the labour market. Data from 40 (mostly developing) countries indicate that women were eight percentage points more likely than men to stop working in the initial phase of the pandemic. There is also strong evidence that the lockdowns and economic insecurity associated with the COVID-19 pandemic increased gender-based violence, has negatively impacted access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and has led to an increase in unpaid care work, mostly impacting women and girls (SDG 5).

The pandemic is also straining official development assistance (SDG 17) and raising the transaction costs of international trade for the least developed countries owing to supply chain disruptions and troubles in accessing trade finance. The implementation of the 2020 population and housing census round has also seen massive delays owing to COVID-19.

**(b) Assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “leaving no one behind” against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, within the respective areas addressed by your intergovernmental body;**

The Commission noted with great concern that the global goal of eradicating poverty by 2030 is slipping from reach and that the multidimensional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation, pushing more than 100 million people into extreme poverty since its outbreak, reversing decades of progress. More than 60 per cent of the world’s employed population are still engaged in the informal economy, in which women are overrepresented, and are often not protected by or able to exercise workers’ rights, social protection and decent working conditions, and are at risk of abuse, harassment and exploitation.

The poorest countries have major budgetary constraints and COVID-19 has forced budget reallocations, making it difficult to increase spending in education and in programs to support gender equality . Yet donors are not giving more aid for these areas either. Preliminary data indicate that many donors have cut international aid budgets in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. High and mounting debt burdens of developing countries and the tightening of government revenues in high-income countries might further negatively affect aid allocations. Changing age structures and other demographic trends have significant implications for needed structural investments to ensure that no one is left behind, notably social protection, health and pensions systems.

Highlighting the importance of demographic data, the Commission urged Member States to invest in and strengthen national capacities, including through enhanced international cooperation and effective multilateralism, for the production, dissemination and analysis of high-quality, reliable and timely statistics and population data disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status and other characteristics relevant in national contexts, to encourage the use of distributional national accounts in order

to facilitate an assessment of well-being that goes beyond gross domestic product, to complete in a timely manner the 2020 round of population and housing censuses, and to improve civil registration and vital statistics.

**(c) Actions and policy recommendations in areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the implementation of the SDGs under review**

The Commission called for the full and effective implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, reaffirmed the outcomes of its reviews and took note of the regional outcome documents that provide region-specific guidance on population and development issues. It further decided to conduct, during its 57th session in 2024, an assessment of the status of implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and its contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Commission also recommended that ECOSOC decide to invite the General Assembly to hold, in 2024, a commemorative event to mark the 30-year anniversary of the ICPD Programme of Action, in the context of the 5-year review cycle of the ICPD. With the ICPD consensus on universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as crucial for gender equality and women's empowerment, and ultimately for the achievement of sustainable development, the 30-year review of the ICPD could accelerate progress towards SDG 5 and other Goals.

The Commission pointed to a number of challenges for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, including those in the areas of education (SDG 4) and gender equality (SDG 5). The goal of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls was recognized as critical to accelerating progress across all SDGs. The Commission urged Member States to mainstream a gender perspective into all development and humanitarian efforts, to protect women's human rights, to strengthen policies that ensure women's meaningful participation and leadership in all spheres of life, and to remove persistent barriers in accessing quality education, lifelong learning and employment opportunities.

Highlighting that violence and discrimination against women and girls, including in the workplace, are major impediments to women's economic empowerment and the enjoyment of their human rights, the Commission called for the adoption of specific preventive measures to protect all women, children and youth from violence, abuse and neglect, forced labour and harmful practices. Policies to address negative social norms, structural barriers and gender stereotypes that affect women in the world of work were also prioritized.

According to a report of the Secretary-General prepared for the session, women account for 80% of all domestic workers. The disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work undertaken by women and girls substantially limits their economic empowerment and independence. The Commission urged Member States to scale up efforts to accelerate the transition of women from informal to formal employment, including access to decent work, equal pay for work of equal value and social protection services, and to take all appropriate measures to effectively value and recognize, reduce, remunerate and equitably redistribute unpaid care and domestic work, including by challenging gender stereotypes and negative social norms and investing in a sustainable and resilient care economy.

During the general debate, Member States spoke about the unique benefits of having access to sexual and reproductive health care and reproductive rights (SDG 5.6), with many highlighting the importance of family planning, reproductive choices and safe abortion to enable women's economic empowerment and achieve sustainable development. Citing recent data, delegations expressed concern that half of all pregnancies are unintended, with 60 per cent of those ending in abortion, and unsafe abortion causing 800 preventable maternal deaths each day.

The Commission learned from a report of the Secretary-General that donor aid in the area of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) decreased from approximately USD 10.7 billion in 2018 to USD 8.4 billion in 2019 (the last year of available data). This amounts to a decline of 21 per cent over the previous year - the largest year-on-year decline in aid for SRH in the last decade. The large decline in aid for population-related matters, especially sexual and reproductive health, threatens the health and well-being of women and girls and undermines the development of their human capital. Without adequate aid for SRH, there is a risk that many girls and women will not complete their education, pursue their dreams and earn a living that protects them from poverty, vulnerability and abuse.

Recognizing the role of education and lifelong learning for improved productivity, poverty alleviation and sustained economic growth, the Commission emphasised the need for increased investments in inclusive and equitable quality education, especially for girls. Investments in education were also discussed in the context of reducing inequalities and capitalizing on the demographic dividend.

Member States were urged also to ensure universal access to quality secondary schooling and workplace training, and to expand access to lifelong skills development. Analysis of donor records shows that while substantial aid is given for education, it is lopsided, focusing more on primary and post-secondary education and less on secondary education. The analysis also shows that aggregate aid to the poorest countries has been stagnant and that countries are falling behind on their commitment to provide at least 0.15—0.20 per cent of their GNI in aid to the world's least developed countries.

The Commission noted that it will consider the theme of “Population, education and sustainable development” at its fifty-sixth session in 2023.

#### **(d) Policy recommendations, commitments and cooperation measures for promoting a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the pandemic while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda**

The continued impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted during both the general debate and negotiations on the Commission’s resolution on the special theme. The pandemic has focused attention on the health implications of economic inequalities and the persistence of underpaid and insecure work, in which women are over-represented. The pandemic kept children out of school, exposed persistent issues around the “digital divide”, increased the burden of care work, especially for women, and exacerbated sexual and gender-based violence.

In the report of the Secretary-General, Member States were encouraged to apply a human rights-based approach to population issues, to recognize demographic change as an opportunity rather than a threat, and to maximize gains from demographic dividends through investments in health, education, empowerment and decent work that reach all persons, in particular the most vulnerable.

The Commission called upon Member States, the United Nations system, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and academia, to strengthen solidarity and cooperation to combat the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and to intensify the contributions of all actors to the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda. In particular, the Commission called for equitable, affordable and timely access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics and health-care services, especially in low- and middle-income

countries.

The Commission encouraged Member States to accelerate the catalytic role that digital technologies, access to the internet, connectivity and digital inclusion play in moderating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on quality education and life-long learning, health, and communications and thus in supporting economic recovery. The report of the Secretary-General also made a specific call to Member States to ensure universal access to quality secondary education and workplace training, and to expand access to lifelong skills development.

The Commission emphasized that the role of entrepreneurship and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in social and economic development, including as a driver of inclusive economic growth, will be more critical than ever during the post-COVID-19 recovery and beyond. It highlighted the importance of adequate training in skills development for all, particularly for youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, women, indigenous peoples, local communities and entrepreneurs.

The Commission reaffirmed the positive contributions of migrants to inclusive growth and sustainable development in their countries of origin, transit and destination and in the response and recovery to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, it acknowledged the importance of facilitating safe, orderly, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, and the importance of promoting safe and secure working environments for migrant workers.

The Commission urged Governments and the international community to ensure that young people, on an equitable and universal basis, enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health by providing them with access to sustainable health and social services, without coercion or discrimination. Countries were urged as well to remove all types of barriers to the ability of adolescents and youth to protect their health.

The Commission also reaffirmed that intergenerational solidarity is fundamental for the achievement of an inclusive and just society for all ages, including youth and older persons. Solidarity is also a prerequisite for social cohesion and a foundation of formal and informal welfare and care systems. Changing demographic, social and economic circumstances may require the adjustment of pension, social security, health and long-term care systems, including to ensure that they are gender-responsive and age-sensitive. Member States were encouraged to reduce poverty and to counter the intergenerational transmission of poverty by strengthening social protection programmes, such as old-age pensions, cash transfers, housing assistance, child benefits and tax breaks for families with children. Delegations agreed that healthy ageing should be fostered worldwide.

The Commission recognized that unsustainable patterns of consumption and production are key drivers of natural resource depletion, climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and malnutrition and recommitted to making fundamental changes in the way that societies produce and consume goods and services, including through increased efficiency in resource use and sustainable economic policies. The Commission also emphasized the importance of promoting more resilient and sustainable lifestyles in harmony with nature and urged the international community to continue to support developing countries in strengthening their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production.

### **(e) Key messages for inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2022 HLPF**

Despite progress achieved to date, access to essential services remains unfulfilled and will be difficult to achieve by 2030 in some cases. For example, SDG target 3.7 (ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services), is off track in many countries and regions and will require accelerated progress to be reached by 2030, with direct implications for progress in SDG target 5.6, and for gender equality more broadly (SDG 5), as well as for education (SDG 4) and other areas of the 2030 Agenda.

The Commission emphasized that sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights are central to the realization of social justice and to the achievement of sustainable development at the global, regional and national levels. It further called on Member States to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education. Member States underscored that reaching these objectives will contribute to efforts to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women, as well as other SDGs.

Governments were urged to take affirmative steps to keep children and adolescents in school (SDG 4), to eliminate barriers to women's participation in the workforce and in decision-making, to promote a more equal sharing of household duties and family responsibilities between women and men, and to recognize and value unpaid housework and direct care in the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection (SDG 5).

Foundational conditions for women's economic empowerment include ensuring that women have the legal right and the means to make their own decisions about forming relationships and about the number and timing of any children they may have. Policies and programmes must ensure equal access to education and health-care services and the ability for women to balance work and family, to save and be financially literate and independent.

Member States should strengthen national capacities, including through enhanced international cooperation and effective multilateralism, for the production, dissemination and analysis of high-quality, reliable and timely statistics and population data disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts for policy formulation by all countries; should encourage the use of distributional national accounts in order to facilitate an assessment of well-being that goes beyond gross domestic product and inform the design of policies for sustained and inclusive economic growth that benefit all; should complete in a timely manner the 2020 round of population and housing censuses; and should improve civil registration and vital statistics.