



Mr. Chairman,

Demographers are generally a pretty optimistic lot. We believe that “that which is not sustainable will not be sustained” and fertility that is well above replacement level is not sustainable if we wish to have populations whose health is improving and longevity is rising. Our projections of future population change incorporate that optimistic view.

Thus, the most quoted variant of those projections, the medium variant, assumes declining mortality in all populations and a continued reduction of fertility in the populations that still have fertility above replacement level. The medium variant also incorporates another crucial assumption: that all populations will reach and maintain below-replacement fertility during a good part of this century. Under those assumptions, the world population reaches 8 billion in 2025 and 9 billion in 2045 but does not go above 10 billion during this century.

Because there is no certainty that the medium variant will be realized, we produce other variants that illustrate the sensitivity of projection results to small changes in fertility. The high variant, which sets fertility half a child above that in the medium variant, yields a world population that continues to add billions every 12 to 15 years and reaches 14 billion in 2100.

Given that the actual future path of fertility may well fall within the range of variation encompassed by the medium and high variants, sustained increases in the world population over this century are still well within the realm of possibility.

Mr. Chairman,

Those scenarios of future population growth have particular relevance for the theme of this session. The evidence shows that reductions in fertility have accelerated economic growth and reduced poverty. Furthermore, fertility reductions have been achieved through improvements in reproductive health, child health, education and the empowerment of women. In country after country, parents have decided to have fewer children in order to provide them with better opportunities.

The extraordinary fertility decline achieved so far can perhaps be best characterized by Hoffer’s insightful observation: “when people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other”, especially if they expect benefits from such imitation. In all societies, fertility reductions have started among those who are better-off and, in due course, their example has been followed by the middle classes and eventually by those with lower socio-economic status.

The fact that both within countries and among countries, high fertility remains concentrated in low-income groups is indicative of their continued marginalization. Lack of resources and limited access to information reduce the options of the poor, including with regard to the exercise of their reproductive rights. It is a matter of urgency to ensure that those barriers disappear.

In developing countries, Governments wishing to accelerate development have much to gain by investing in reproductive health. Such investments would not only contribute to improve the lives of millions but are also likely to result in beneficial demographic trends which, by moderating the gr