



**Statement by Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive
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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here today.

In less than two weeks, on 31 October, the world's population will reach 7 billion.

As we approach this important milestone, humanity is at a crossroads.

We are living longer and healthier lives, and couples worldwide are choosing to have fewer children.

But huge inequities persist.

Too many people still suffer from poverty, discrimination, and violence.

Many low-income countries still experience rapid population growth while many rich and middle-income countries are concerned about low fertility, declining populations and ageing.

Gaps between rich and poor are growing. And more people than ever are vulnerable to food insecurity, water shortages, and weather-related disasters.

Ensuring the well-being of current and future generations will require unprecedented global cooperation.

World of 7 billion – a challenge

Population growth

As more and more people join those of us already here, solving existing problems, such as poverty, inequality and wasteful consumption, are becoming more and more urgent – and new challenges will arise that demand the best in each of us.

Nearly all current population growth – 97 per cent – is occurring in less developed countries, many of which are already struggling to meet their people's needs.

Horn of Africa

A while ago I was on a mission in the Horn of Africa where the drought has caused famine and affected more than 12 million people.

It is evident that the crisis goes beyond food shortages. Health care provision is deteriorating due to lack of medical supplies and trained health workers. Many displaced women face violence and exploitation. And many young people can't complete their education.

These issues are not directly caused by population growth, the root cause of the crisis was the recent rain failures, but the situation highlights the plight of people living where the land struggles to support human life.

Ageing

The other side of the population coin is that as expansion of family planning allows people to have smaller families, and as people live longer through medical breakthroughs and better access to health care, the proportion of older people is increasing almost everywhere.

Currently, population ageing is particularly pronounced in Asia, Europe and Latin America. While more developed countries have higher proportions of older persons, less developed countries are ageing at a faster pace, with less time to prepare.

Ageing is a global success story, but it also presents societies with new challenges related to economic growth, health care and personal security.

Urbanization

Another macro-trend that the world is witnessing is rapid urbanization. In 1960, one in three people lived in a city; today more than half of all people do. By 2045, it is predicted that two in three people will live in urban areas.

Earlier this year I visited one of the fastest growing cities in the world – Dhaka in Bangladesh. In 1975 it had a population of 2.2 million. Today, 15

million people live there. And by 2025, the city's population is projected to reach almost 21 million.

Overall, the cities of the developing world will double in size in the next generation, and the number of slum dwellers is growing.

The question is how to support populations and make cities livable and sustainable, and how to provide young people with access to education and health services – all while sustaining the natural environment for this generation, the next, and all who follow.

World of 7 billion – an opportunity

While cities concentrate poverty, they also provide the best means of escaping it. Cities have long been the engines of economic growth, and densely populated areas can be more environmentally sustainable than sprawling communities and allow for more efficient provision of services.

Urbanization also accelerates the trend toward smaller families and offers more opportunities for women and young people.

This is just one example of the vast possibilities in the world of 7 billion.

Women and young people

Women and young people are the two population groups with the greatest potential to accelerate progress in the developing world.

Education is one of the keys to seize this potential.

Investing in women and young people's education, including age-appropriate sexuality education, health, and gender equality can speed up economic growth and improve countries' prospects for sustainable development.

In our world today, there are an estimated 1.8 billion young people who are between the ages of 10 to 24. They constitute more than a quarter of the world's population, and 90 per cent of them live in developing countries.

Young people can become a powerful force for progress if they are equipped with quality education, health and skills to reach their full potential.

Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health

We also need to urgently accelerate progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals, especially MDG 5 to improve maternal health.

A year ago in September, the Secretary-General of United Nations launched the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, and now nearly 200 partners, including more than 50 countries, have joined the effort.

Within the United Nations, the H4+ agencies – WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNAIDS and the World Bank – are coordinating extra funding and providing expertise and practical assistance for health programming at a national and local level.

World of 7 billion – a Call to Action

A lot of good work is already under way, but sometimes population dynamics are thought to be beyond the influence of policy making, or that they can only be addressed through policies that infringe on fundamental human rights and freedoms.

I try and explain over and over again that neither perception is correct. Population dynamics are not destiny, and they can be, and have been, addressed through policies solidly based on human-rights.

First, countries must recognize that it is the opportunities and choices of individuals that add up to development and demographic changes. These issues can be addressed by enlarging, not restricting, these choices and opportunities.

Better access to education beyond the primary level, contribute to reductions in infant, child and maternal mortality, empowerment of women, and lower fertility.

Second, countries must empower women not only to decide on the number and timing of their children, but also to fully participate in economic, social and political life.

Women who lack education and economic opportunities often have more children, and because they have more children they have restricted access to education and economic opportunities. Such poverty traps can be avoided through smart policies and programmes that support the rights of women.

Third, countries must recognize, cultivate and seize the potential of their youth populations.

All young people should have access to quality education and health services to reach their full potential.

Closing

We have four years left until 2015, the target year of the Millennium Development Goals.

We need to urgently accelerate progress towards meeting the Goals, especially MDG 5 to improve maternal health, including both its targets: to reduce maternal mortality and provide universal access to reproductive health.

Moreover, we need to chart a way forward from the MDGs – with focus on sustainable development, where education, sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, population dynamics, empowerment of young people and gender equality have a key part.

Like the Secretary-General recently said at the General Assembly: “Saving our planet, lifting people out of poverty, advancing economic growth — these are one and the same fight.”

My colleagues at UNFPA and I are fully committed to these issues and to ensure access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights for all. We’re dedicated to improve and empower the lives of underserved populations, especially women and young people.

For me it’s clear that to make progress on the development agenda as a whole, to make progress in any society, the guiding principle of investments must be equity.

Countries must be able to reach out to the lowest quintile and ensure that everyone can enjoy a life of human rights and human dignity.

By investing in health and education of women and girls we can unleash the full potential of half the world's population and break the cycle of poverty.

By ensuring that large youth generations can claim their right to health, education and decent working conditions we can empower them to become an unstoppable force for economic and social progress.

The milestone of 7 billion provides an opportunity to demonstrate our shared responsibility to care for each other and for our planet.

I thank you.