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Statement submitted by C-Fam, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) is non-profit educational organization that interacts with diplomats and the general public about issues related to human rights. For over twenty years, we have worked to defend human life at all stages and the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society within international institutions. We are headquartered in New York and Washington, D.C.

Half a century ago, there was widespread concern that unless population growth was significantly reduced, mass starvation would result. While global fertility rates have fallen in many regions, continued population growth coupled with increased life expectancy has produced a current population far greater than what was seen as sustainable in the mid-twentieth century.

The Malthusian predictions of the past failed to recognize the power of human ingenuity and the will to solve problems. While food production has risen to meet the challenges of a growing global population, further challenges exist in ensuring that all people everywhere are able to access sufficient nutrition. This problem has only been exacerbated by the global pandemic, which has disrupted both production and distribution systems around the world.

The pandemic has forced us to reconsider which are the most pressing needs, and which products and services are truly essential. Access to adequate nutrition is one of the most basic and fundamental human requirements: an unmet need for food and water is truly a matter of life and death.

Nevertheless, there are worrying signs that the Malthusian attitudes of fifty years ago are starting to resurface once again, despite the failure of their predictions of mass human extinction to materialize. The current focus on sustainability and climate change has once again led to a focus on fertility reduction, this time framed as a matter of empowering women and girls.

According to the bestselling book *Drawdown*, contraception is among the most effective ways of reducing carbon emissions. While its authors insist that this means voluntary family planning, not coercive population control, they rely heavily on the concept of “unmet need” for family planning – a concept that does not reflect women’s real or perceived access to family planning methods, nor their desire to use them. In fact, according to the Guttmacher Institute, only about five percent of “unmet need” for family planning is attributed by women themselves to a lack of access to methods.

The United Nations Population Fund has set as one of their three main goals the reduction of “unmet need” for family planning to zero. Since much of this “need” is attributable to women’s own concerns about side effects and risks, their personal opposition to contraception, and other matters of personal choice, it is unclear how this goal is to be achieved without coercive measures that would violate women’s human rights.

Meanwhile, another of UNFPA’s goals is to end preventable maternal deaths. According to *The Lancet*, severe anaemia doubles a woman’s risk of maternal mortality, and this problem is particularly acute in developing regions, where both nutrition and health care services are more likely to be inadequate.

When a severely anaemic woman dies from postpartum hemorrhage, her death is not due to an “unmet need” for contraceptives – even in the most resource-deprived settings, families will have children. Instead, we must consider the woman’s true unmet needs: access to prenatal care, skilled birth attendants, emergency obstetric care if necessary, and good quality nutrition, before, during, and after pregnancy and birth.

At previous Commissions on Population and Development, there have been failures to reach consensus due to attempts to inject highly controversial topics such as abortion – which is not a human right – into the outcome. Given the unprecedented and challenging events of this past year, it is more important than ever that we reaffirm our commitments to the goals and targets that enjoy universal consensus but require further work to make into a reality.

The challenge of ensuring access to high quality, nutritious food for all has never been trivial, and the pandemic has added further strains. As we strive to meet this challenge, we must insist that nothing can be deemed essential in a global forum without global consensus.
