

**OPENING STATEMENT
OF
THE ECE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
At the
European Population Forum 2004
Geneva, 12 January 2004**

Ambassador Fust,
Commissioner Nielson,
Madam Obaid,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Palais des Nations and the European Population Forum 2004. This Forum is the latest in a long series of regional meetings on population issues and policies in UNECE countries that the UNECE has held since the early 1980s. The UNECE organised one of these meetings jointly with the Council of Europe and several of them jointly with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the co-organiser of this Forum. The most important of these meetings were the ministerial-level European Population Conference (EPC) held in Geneva in 1993 in preparation for the International Conference on Population and Development, and the Ministerial Conference on Ageing (MiCA) held in Berlin in 2002. The Governments of Switzerland and Germany hosted these two conferences respectively.

All the previous UNECE population meetings were intergovernmental events, which negotiated and adopted final documents, the most important of which were the 1993 EPC Recommendations and the 2002 MiCA Regional Implementation Strategy. This Forum is a unique event insofar as it is a high-level expert meeting attended by experts from the executive and legislative branches of governments, academia and research institutions, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, and the private sector. The expert format of the event will provide you with an opportunity for a free and constructive exchange of views without challenging you to negotiate and adopt a final document.

I am convinced that during the next three days you will make the best of the opportunity that the Forum provides you to address old and newly emerging population issues, globally and in the UNECE region, and to identify requisite policy responses

consistent with opportunities and constraints that are inherent to our societies. I do hope that the Chair summary of the Forum, which will be finalised soon after the Forum, will become a useful guide for the future work of UNECE and UNFPA in the population field and that it will provide an important input into a broader population debate in Europe, in particular in its various intergovernmental fora.

Let me now address some of the current and prospective salient population developments common to much of Europe along with the challenges they pose to our societies and their various stakeholders. Europe is currently in a unique epoch in its population history. Some governments and population scholars have recently suggested that from a demographic point of view we are at a crossroad. I share these characterisations to the extent that they suggest that Europe is moving into a new demographic regime, a regime not known to Europeans in their recent history.

What are its characteristics? One of them is stagnation and an imminent decline, initially in the working-age population and labour force and later in the total population, in a growing number of countries. The decline in the total population has already started in Central and Eastern Europe and is beginning to spread to Southern Europe. The United Nations demographers from New York project that the combined population of Europe proper will be smaller by some 96 million or 13 per cent in 2050 than it was in 2000.

Next is the acceleration of the ageing of our populations and a faster rise in old-age dependency. The so-called demographic bonus of ageing, which many European countries enjoyed during the last few decades, is quickly dissipating. European countries have successfully coped with ageing so far, but the challenges of ageing will only increase. By the middle of this century the fastest ageing populations, such as those of Italy and Spain, will have around 40 per cent of their people at age 60 and above.

The key root cause of the prospective decline and ageing, especially where these are expected to be most pronounced, is low or very low fertility. Mortality decline also increasingly contributes to ageing. The current fertility depression, particularly in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, but also in parts of Western Europe, has been caused in part by a universal tendency of family-formation postponement, including the postponement of having children and parenting. It appears that a major fertility recovery will not follow the postponement and, according to many expert views, low fertility is here to stay. The key question that you would need to deal with is why younger people opt for a family size that does not ensure replacement of populations.

As the demographic balance between Europe and the developing world shifts in favour of the latter, there are growing migration pressures on many European countries. Moreover, as domestic labour will sooner or later grow scarce, there will be a growing need to rely on foreign workers who will, only naturally, want their families to join them. In view of this, immigrant populations in many European countries are poised to increase

further in absolute and relative terms, rendering Europe increasingly multiethnic and multiracial. In addition to this, as pointed out in one of the background papers, immigration is only a part of the solution as the number of immigrants required in an average UNECE country to maintain the population size, labour force and support ratio annually is increasing and is hardly sustainable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Future developments will provide both constraints and opportunities for European societies. The challenge will be for all policymaking actors – or more broadly, for all stakeholders – in all policy fields to rise to the occasion and help our societies both adapt to the oncoming changes and influence them in a positive manner.

The Berlin Ministerial Conference on Ageing recently showed the way forward – towards innovative policy responses to demographic change and population ageing. More importantly, the Berlin agreements are not just yet another document adopted by an intergovernmental conference – they are being put into practice as we speak, for example in Germany, France, and Italy, some of the countries currently implementing pension reforms. The Berlin document has adopted a holistic approach, considered a society of all ages, called for coherent and mutually supportive policies, and recommended that ageing policies be mainstreamed in all policy fields. These include older persons, economic, labour market, educational, social security, health, family and gender policy fields.

As you deliberate in the coming days on the issues on the agenda, I hope that you will formulate views on how to mainstream family issues, such as partnering, childbearing and parenting, as well as how to mainstream migration management and integration of immigrant populations into as many policy fields as appropriate. Lastly, I hope that you will appreciate the fact that there are numerous categories of stakeholders that can make a contribution to the formulation and implementation of policies.

In conclusion let me suggest that many issues that you will be discussing are difficult and sometimes controversial. However, I trust that you will debate them in a constructive manner.

Thank you.