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### Panel: Childbearing and parenting in low fertility countries: enabling choices

*Statement by Ms Marlyse Dormond, Member of the National Council, President of PLANes*

The freedom to choose when to become a parent and how many children to have is a fundamental right. Respect of this right also offers the best way to ensure a satisfactory demographic equilibrium.

This principle applies when demographic growth is too rapid, as in many poor countries where, owing to inadequate access to reproductive health services and to relevant information, people usually have more children than they wish. Here children are not wanted but passively accepted, a situation that may later cause parents to neglect their offspring's food, education and health needs.

In our countries a lack of reproductive freedom tends to have the opposite effect. There are many constraints which limit the parents' right to choose when to have children. My considerations focus on my own country, Switzerland.

The first important point is that Switzerland is one of the few rich countries without a maternity insurance scheme worthy of the name. All projects proposed until now have been refused by popular vote.

Job insecurity is probably the greatest factor curtailing parents' freedom of choice. In this area, a regular "cultural revolution" has taken place during recent decades in Switzerland. Under normal circumstances, parents of the last generation could usually count upon stable employment. Unless they were guilty of a serious professional error, people could reasonably expect to keep their job until retirement. Members of management and the public sector were committed to safeguarding and developing jobs, and guided by a sense of social responsibility. Today, young people launch their career under very different circumstances. To increase their profit margins, companies, even public ones, fire employees who have always performed well, without discussion. Young people are hired for two or three years, before having to take up the difficult search for a new job. Regardless of their professional qualifications, they may submit dozens of applications without ever being invited to a job interview. How are they to have enough confidence to start a family in such conditions?

Specific family benefits are also lacking. A recurrent theme in the Swiss political debate is the funding of nurseries and day care centres for children. Considering the needs of families with two working parents or - even more critical - single parent families, these are decidedly in short supply. Relevant projects are consistently denied subsidies. While deplored population ageing and the falling birth rate, the majority of politicians continues to insist that childbearing and parenting are a strictly private affair.

Parents must also contend with problems generated by the organisation of schools. Switzerland, a federal state, has twenty six different school systems, in most of which children are not taken care of continuously throughout the day. Parents have to step in at mealtimes, other recesses, or in the event of unforeseen changes in the school schedule.

Housing is a further hurdle. Architects and builders seem to forget that a family may have more than two children, and parents who cannot afford to buy a home or pay a high rent often find it difficult to meet their housing needs in satisfactory fashion.

I trust that these examples are an eloquent illustration of what reproductive freedom really means in Switzerland.

To conclude, let me say that our countries will only reach the demographic equilibrium necessary for their survival by finding effective solutions to these problems. Simply appealing to the population to have children is not enough.