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**Population, technology and research in the context
of sustainable development**

Statement submitted by Population Connection, 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

Over the past few years, we have observed an intentional shift away from the measure of unmet need for family planning, with some reproductive health and rights groups arguing it should be replaced with measures that reflect whether women actually intend to use contraception. Population Connection believes this shift risks undermining global commitments to reproductive autonomy and sustainable development. Here is why.

Unmet need for family planning is broadly defined as the number or proportion of fertile, sexually active women who want to avoid or delay pregnancy but are not using contraception. Globally, an estimated 259 million women have an unmet need for modern contraceptives.

In recent years, critics of unmet need have argued that this measure makes assumptions about what's best for women. These critics state that many women who fall under the definition of unmet need do not actually want or intend to use contraception in the future, and that this is a valid choice.

This view neglects the critical fact that not intending to use any form of modern birth control despite wanting to avoid pregnancy is usually rooted in disempowerment. Research shows that the top reasons for non-use of contraception are misinformation, fear of side effects, male opposition, and lack of knowledge about family planning and/or the likelihood of conception.

Claiming that fertile, sexually active people who do not want to get pregnant only need contraception if they explicitly demand it is akin to suggesting that people with HIV who do not want to be sick with AIDS do not require medication unless they ask for it. Walking away from cases like this is irresponsible and harmful.

Education, access to quality information, and outreach efforts to overcome harmful gender norms and patriarchal customs are vital to enabling empowered decision-making. Only when women are fully and accurately informed, and unconstrained by sociocultural barriers, are they truly free to make their own decisions about their own bodies.

Women who want to avoid pregnancy but are not using an effective method of contraception (i.e., women with an unmet need for modern family planning) account for 82 per cent of unintended pregnancies. More than 60 per cent of unintended pregnancies end in abortion and an estimated 45 per cent of all abortions are unsafe, causing up to 13 per cent of all maternal deaths.

As the global community advances technology-enabled data systems, digital health platforms, and innovative research tools to better understand population dynamics, it is crucial that we retain standardized, globally comparable indicators such as unmet need for family planning. Emerging demographic research methods, from mobile data collection to AI-supported health information systems, rely on consistent measures to track progress, identify inequities, and strengthen evidence-based policymaking. Abandoning this foundational indicator would create critical data blind spots at a moment when precision, transparency, and reliable population metrics are essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Deprioritizing the measure of unmet need will lead to more unintended pregnancies, more unsafe abortions, and more preventable pregnancy-related deaths. More forced births will exacerbate poverty, increase population pressure, and set back all 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals. We simply cannot afford to neglect the vital roles of education, information access, and the advancement of gender equality in international family planning programs.

Population Connection urges all researchers, governments, and reproductive health and rights stakeholders to continue recording the critically important indicator of unmet need for family planning. This is essential to accurately identifying funding gaps and channelling financial flows to where they are most needed in the pursuit of sustainable development.
