



**Opening Ceremony
XXVI IUSSP Conference**

**Statement of Thoraya Ahmed Obaid
UNFPA Executive Director**

**27 September 2009, 5:30pm
Marrakech, Morocco**

Good afternoon,
Distinguished Delegates,
Members of the IUSSP,
Ladies and Gentleman,

It is my honour to address you as the Executive Director of UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund at this important conference which is hosted under the patronage of his Majesty the King Mohammed VI. This reflects the tremendous importance his Majesty gives to population and development issues.

May I take this opportunity to congratulate his Majesty for his efforts in promoting human development through his personal initiative "Initiative Nationale de Development Humain" as part of his global vision for the development of Morocco. The participation of Civil Society, gender equality, maternal health and education for all stand at the core of this vision.

UNFPA is proud to be a partner of the IUSSP, and we are proud to support this 26th IUSSP Conference. I am pleased to join you this year as we commemorate the 15th anniversary of the historic 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.

Together, we share the progress that has been made in carrying the Cairo agenda forward. More women are using contraception, fertility has declined, more newborns are surviving, more girls are in school, and the response to HIV/AIDS has been strengthened.

The achievements in implementing the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development are strongly associated with your work as members of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population. The work we do at UNFPA benefits tremendously from your expertise.

Development policies are more effective when countries incorporate demographics into their decision-making. Only when urbanization is met with proactive planning, can the negative consequences of urban sprawl and slums be addressed. Only when population dynamics are incorporated into a response to climate change, can the response be effective.

The demographic challenges facing our world today are unprecedented and demand a policy response. While we welcome the world's largest youth population, we experience a simultaneous increase in the number of older persons in countries worldwide. While we witness rapid population growth in the world's poorest nations, some of the world's richest countries face population decline.

Today more than half of the global population lives in regions with below replacement fertility, which has become a social and economic concern and policy challenge. While many highly developed nations have deemed the trend of fertility decline as inevitable and irreversible, I am intrigued by preliminary evidence that after a certain point of high development, especially development that benefits women, fertility rises again. This has been observed in several European countries. Clearly, this is an area that we need to understand better and more research is needed.

Just as women and couples need to be able to make their own choices about *childbearing*—about if and when to have children, they also need to have choices about *childrearing* and how to successfully balance the responsibilities of work and family life.

Whether these choices are available, which depends on national policies and programmes, will play a large part in determining our demographic future.

Today there are 200 million women with an unmet need for family planning and demand for these services will continue to rise. Whether women and couples have access to family planning information and services will determine whether world population will reach the UN's median projection of 9 billion or climb to the high projection of 11 billion people by the year 2050.

UNFPA is committed to universal access to reproductive health by 2015 and this includes a commitment to re-energize international family planning.

Overall, I agree with a recent study from the Netherlands that demographic changes are, together with climate change, among the greatest challenges facing the world in the 21st century.

As researchers, scientists and advocates, we must continue to build the evidence base and strengthen understanding of demographic trends and population dynamics to sharpen policy, inform the delivery of social services, and hold governments accountable for the commitments they have made.

Together let us continue to build on the strong foundation of human rights and the principle of voluntary, informed free choice that guides the international population agenda. I say this because I am concerned about new voices for population control. We must stand strong against coercion and demographic targets that violate the rights of individuals.

UNFPA looks forward to our continuing partnership with IUSSP. The demographic milestone of 7 billion people in 2011 provides us with an opportunity. Let us use the occasion to make the case that investing in population, women and reproductive health is a powerful way to reduce poverty, protect our environment and build a more just and stable world.

Thank you.