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THE CHANGING AGE STRUCTURES OF POPULATIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

(Excerpts from Malaysia's country statement at the 40th Session of the United Nations Commission on Population and Development, 9-13 April 2007, New York)

The transition from a regime of high mortality and high fertility to one of low mortality and low fertility in Malaysia is a relatively recent phenomenon. Like in many developing countries, the demographic transition in Malaysia is characterized by rapid declines in mortality and moderate declines in fertility. The crude death rate has drastically declined from a high of 20.0 in 1947 to a very low level of 4.5 deaths per thousand population in 2006. Such rapid decline was due to the availability of modern medical and health facilities and the general improvement in socio-economic conditions.

Accompanying the rapid decline in mortality is the steady decline in fertility. The crude birth rate has declined from 45 births in mid-1950s to a moderate level of approximately 19 births per thousand population in 2006. This decline is partly due to the availability of family planning services and indirectly, due to the general improvement in the socio-economic conditions associated with development. Malaysia is now at the second stage of the demographic transition. The crude death rate has reached a very low level and is expected to increase slightly in the future following changes in age structure. Fertility is expected to continue its downward trend.

The present population of Malaysia can be described as "youthful". In 2005, it is estimated that as many as 33 per cent of the current population are under the age of 15 years. The current median age of the population is less than 25 years. With regard to the aged population (60 years and older), there has been a clear trend towards an ageing population. The proportion of aged population is currently at 6.7 per cent as compared to 5.8 per cent in 1991. On the other hand, as a result of declining fertility in the process of demographic transition, the proportion of people aged 25 – 59 has increased from 38.6 per cent in 1991 to 42.0 per cent in 2005. This gain is a "demographic dividend" to Malaysia, whereby the

economic dependency would be low which would lead to the possibility of raising the country's rate of economic growth and its standard of living. The overall dependency ratio has decreased from 73.3 per cent in 1991 to 64.5 per cent in 2005. The drop in the dependency ratio was due to the increase in the proportion of the working age population of 15 – 59 years as well as slower growth of the population below 15 years. However, this ratio is expected to increase to 67.5 per cent in 2020 due to the steady increase in the number and proportion of those aged 60 and above.

In the next two decades, Malaysia will still have a moderately "young" population, with those within the age group 0 – 14 constituting about 30 per cent of the total population while those in the age group 15 – 24 will constitute about 17 percent of the total population in 2020.

This implies that much of our development resources will still need to be devoted to cater for the needs of the young age groups, particularly in terms of child care; primary, secondary and tertiary education; skill development; and other social services. In this regard the government will improve the education, training and lifelong learning delivery system to enhance the quality of human capital needed to meet the challenges of development. Under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006 – 2010), greater access to tertiary education will be provided to achieve the target of 40 per cent enrolment rate for the age group 17 – 23 years in 2010.

While attending to the needs of the younger segment of the population, there is also considerable concern for the steady increase of older persons, both numerically and in proportionate terms. Steps have been taken by Malaysia in planning for the needs of the projected three million elderly by the year 2020. As care for the older persons in Malaysia has traditionally been within the family

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system, further decline in fertility would ultimately reduce the number of family members available for care of their aged dependents. This problem is compounded as more women participate in the labour market and with increasing mobility of young family members.

Over the years Malaysia has introduced various policies and programmes such as the National Welfare Policy (1990) and the Plan of Action for Older Persons (1995) that aimed to improve the quality of life for older persons and to integrate them into the mainstream of development. The Government calls for the welfare of the aged to be safeguarded with the support of the family and the community. Institutional care is to be considered only as a last resort. The Government allowed tax deductions for the payment of medical expenses incurred by parents. The Government also approved the establishment of day-care centers to provide care for older persons during the day in the absence of family members. To date, 18 day-care centers have been established throughout the country. In addition to that, NGOs, namely Malaysian Gerontology Association and USIAMAS Welfare Association have introduced "home help" to assist elderly who stay alone at home.

For older persons who are destitute and have no relatives to care for them, the Government has and will continue to establish homes and provide financial aid especially to the elderly living in poverty to ensure their well-being. Presently there are 209 old folks homes managed by the Department of Social Welfare and 196 operated by NGOs in Malaysia. The Government also provided financial aid to a sum of RM200.00 per person monthly particularly to elderly living in poverty.

Both the abovementioned policy and plan of action are currently being reviewed, taking into consideration the changes and new challenges faced by community and society.

Taking cognisance of the socio-economic implications of the increasing proportion of the elderly, programmes for the aged shifted from a welfare approach to a development approach. This is to ensure active and productive ageing. These programmes emphasised on community participation that include the promotion of healthy lifestyles, social and recreational activities. These programmes also encouraged volunteerism among older persons as well as intergenerational, lifelong learning programmes and learning skills to enable their continued contribution to family, society and country.

The Government also recognised community-based programmes as one of the feasible approaches that would be able to meet current and future challenges pertaining to older persons. Additional support facilities

will be provided so that reliance on family support would not put great stress on family members.

Despite its numerous challenges, population ageing also present great opportunities. The large number of older people represents a vast pool of human resources for national development, particularly as they are now better trained as a result of rising educational level. In 2001, the Government increased the retirement age from 55 years to 56 years. Today a male and a female retiree can expect to live another 21 and 23 years respectively.

Malaysia will continue to encourage greater female participation in the labour force that would enable women to contribute more towards socio-economic development of the country. As the greater involvement of women in the labour market will require creating greater balance between unpaid work and paid labour, effective labour market policies must encompass more than just job creation. Under the current Ninth Malaysia Plan, measures will be undertaken to ensure the provision of necessary support facilities to enable women to enter the labour market. These include the introduction of family-friendly workplace practices and the provision of appropriate training programmes. Community childcare and nursery centres will be established in selected housing areas to ensure the availability of affordable quality childcare. A child-care subsidy of RM180.00 will also be provided to families with income less than RM2000.00 a month. In addition, the re-entry of women into the labour market will be facilitated with the provision of retraining opportunities.

The private sector, being the largest employer, will be encouraged to facilitate women to enter the labour market through the provision of more conducive working arrangements that take into account the multiple roles and responsibilities of women. These include new and flexible working arrangements such as teleworking, part-time work and job-sharing. In addition, efforts will be undertaken to implement the concept of home office to encourage women to embark on small businesses.

Recognising the increase participation of women in labour force, steps are currently being undertaken to create awareness and provide knowledge to parents on the importance and need to balance work and family responsibilities. Towards this end, the Parenting@Work Programme was developed to provide guidance on parenting skills, ensure stable and resilient family units as well as to equip families to face modern day challenges.

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