Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon

UNFPA is pleased to be part of this important process of contributing to the successful midterm review of the Istanbul Programme of Action for Least Developed Countries (IPoA). I would like to begin by conveying the greetings of Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, Under Secretary-General and Executive Director of UNFPA who sends his apologies for not being able to join you personally.

At the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, when the international community adopted the IPoA, the overarching objective was to ensure that at least half of the LDCs graduated from the LDC status by the year 2020. We are now slightly more than three years shy of that target year and yet we still face enormous challenges that threaten to derail the achievement of that objective.

The review of the implementation of the Millennium Declaration and the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the Paris Agreement to combat climate change have provided a clear vision and road map of the comprehensive actions and partnerships needed to leave no one behind, especially developing countries. Those outcomes- the commitments made by world leaders for a transformative agenda for sustainable development-are central to responding to the challenges identified in the context of the midterm review of the IPOA.

This forum is therefore being held at a watershed moment. Will the LDCs and their partners in the international community continue with the responses that have left LDCs standing in place or shall we see this as the opportunity, a potential turning point, for true and sustainable socio-economic transformation? LDCs are not just characterized by their challenges but are endowed by the enormous potential and capacities that their people are able to harness. Is this our opportunity to invest in building that quality
human capital that would transform the lives of all those who live in LDCs and guarantee quality of living consistent with the 2030 Agenda?

With the largest youth generation in history, it is time to invest in young people if we are to realize the ambitious Agenda 2030. Investments in human capacities to enable these young people to achieve their potential are essential in all countries, at all times. Indeed, this was the core message of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the conclusion of the 20 year review of its implementation and recommendations for its follow up beyond 2014, and subsequently in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Even more so, countries with proportionately large populations on the cusp of adulthood and working age have a transformative opportunity. These countries can accelerate development within the course of a generation through increasing support to the health of children, adolescents and youth, a revolution in modern education, more innovative and safer employment, and the full social and economic participation of girls and women.

When these investments coincide with a high proportion of people entering adulthood, the result is referred to as a “demographic dividend”. The demographic dividend is built on investments in each human person, without discrimination, while according them the rights and dignity as articulated in the ICPD Programme of Action. Demographic dividends helped South Korea and other “Asian Tiger” countries experience a development boom, driven in large part by extraordinary growth in the scale and quality of investments in human capacities.

This is the accelerated development Least Developed Countries are seeking in order to close the gap with other countries and unleash the full potential of their populations.

In the background report for this meeting, UNFPA has reviewed the population and health trends of LDCs across the key factors that accelerate development, and generate the potential for a demographic dividend: the pursuit of empowerment, education and employment for all people.

The findings show important positive developments that are rarely highlighted in a set of countries where challenges tend to get the most attention:

- Major gains in life expectancy across the populations of many LDCs since 2000;
- A decline of as much as 50 percent in maternal and child mortality;
- Major improvements in primary education, including closing the gender gap;
- A doubling of contraceptive prevalence and increase in the contraceptive options available to women, which has been a key contributor to significant decrease in the number of children women in LDCs are having – from 6.2 on average to 4.3 over the last 20 years; and
Demographic shifts driven by these fertility declines that portend the age structure changes linked to the demographic dividend

These positive developments could set the stage for the accelerated development of the demographic dividend. Yet review of human capabilities – and what enables people to achieve them – in LDCs shows the barriers they face as well. We need to address the barriers to empowerment, education and employment women and girls experience due to lack of access to sexual and reproductive health, including child marriage, lack of access to modern contraception, adolescent pregnancy, ill sexual and reproductive health including maternal mortality and morbidity. Addressing those is necessary for progress for women and girls and therefore for societies as a whole. This is 2030 Agenda and SDGs logic -- that in order to achieve one goal, you need to act on another.

Finally, I want to talk about the importance of data. The review of IPoA implementation as well as the ICPD Beyond 2014 Global report points out to a huge amount to find in existing data that can significantly improve governance and make it more responsive to today’s and future population. There are enormous data gaps, in the areas of housing and employment, adolescents, migration and displacement, discrimination, and more, that are major barriers to data driven governance in LDCs.

Measuring progress in achieving the SDGs will require a steady flow of high-quality, disaggregated, timely, authoritative and accessible data. To this end, UNFPA will facilitate partnerships to build data capacity within countries. We will support the establishment of costed roadmaps for national data ecosystems to enable the decision-making of development actors. We will implement the UNFPA Census 2020 Strategy providing “on-call” technical support to governments for the generation and use of georeferenced census findings, including for SDG reporting.

Let me confirm our promise to work with LDCs countries to realize the economic, social and peace dividends by investing in their youth. As of this minute there are more young people alive than ever before in all of human history. They are the SDG generation. If we bend the curve of their destinies over the next 15 years – bend them for inclusion, for engagement, for empowerment based on robust education and on the values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, realization of the ambitions of the SDG is inevitable.

I thank you