



## United Nations System Common Messages on Policy Responses to Demographic Change

Global demographic trends underpin significant transformations that profoundly impact sustainable development, including efforts to reduce poverty and hunger; ensure food, energy and water security; provide housing, health services and education; create jobs and income; finance social protection and pensions; and grow economies. These shifts have implications for inclusive and sustainable development, including for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment across the life course. Population dynamics can also intersect with climate change, environmental degradation and inequality to heighten exposure to disaster risks, reshaping vulnerabilities and resilience capacities. Therefore, it is vital that demographic change receives an explicit focus in the joint support of UN agencies to countries. Key demographic trends that are impacting people and societies across the globe include: broad variations in population trends between and within world regions and countries; population ageing; and migration and changes in spatial distribution.

While the underlying causes and implications of these trends continue to evolve, many Member States are navigating both the longstanding concerns about rapid population growth and more recent concerns about low fertility, population ageing and decline. In these contexts, framings that fall short of the standards and norms established in various intergovernmental agreements risk undermining human rights, reinforcing ageism, and reversing decades of progress in gender equality and women's empowerment. At the same time, negative narratives on international migration disavow the rights of migrants and their positive contributions to the economic and social development of countries of origin and destination.

Against this background, the UN system should consistently promote an evidence-based, rights-based and gender responsive discourse on ways to anticipate and adapt to the macro-level implications of demographic changes. The following common messages outline core principles for policy responses that address the challenges and leverage the opportunities of demographic change, which are grounded in evidence and system-wide experience.

### All responses to demographic change should uphold human rights and empower all people to make choices

Today's world is characterized by significant diversity in demographic indicators including rates of population growth or decline, age structure, fertility, mortality and migration. Whether a country is experiencing high or low fertility, policies should aim to protect individual rights and choices regarding the number and timing of children. Decades ago, the main threats to rights and choices often arose in contexts of high fertility and rapid population growth. Today, such threats may also arise in contexts of low fertility and ageing or declining populations, or in situations of voluntary or forced population mobility. UN officials should be cognizant of the increasing need for assistance in developing effective, evidence- and rights-based responses to challenges and opportunities that come with demographic change, and encourage Member States to:

- Prioritize **human rights, dignity, and individual well-being** in their responses to demographic change, ensuring that people are at the center of development strategies; empowering all individuals, especially women and girls and young people, to make free, informed decisions about their bodies, lives and futures; and strengthening legal and policy frameworks for equality and non-discrimination, aligned with international human rights standards.
- Encourage a focus on supporting couples and individuals to achieve their **fertility preferences** and thereby close the gap between desired and actual fertility rates, rather than a focus on numerical fertility targets set by governments.

- Uphold **reproductive rights** in all settings; ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, including for family planning, information and education; include at all levels, as appropriate, of formal and non-formal schooling, education about population and health issues, including sexual and reproductive health issues; reduce unsafe abortions; and ensure access to safe abortion where it is legal. In contexts where fertility rates are low or declining, backsliding on women’s or reproductive rights can reinforce harmful gender norms and stereotypes and undermine individual autonomy and well-being, while not resulting in a sizable or sustainable fertility increase.
- Create **enabling conditions** to address the biological, social and economic barriers to childbearing and raising, including ensuring access to high-quality and affordable healthcare, education and childcare; promoting gender equality in both the workplace and the home; and expanding work–family balance policies, to address the fact that in today’s world many do not achieve their desired family size.
- Combat ageism while recognizing the unique needs and contributions of older people, in order to protect the **human rights and dignity of older persons**, in particular older women who face intersecting forms of discrimination, and to promote intergenerational solidarity.
- Promote **rights- and evidence-based inclusive narratives** that recognize the contributions of all members of society and that counter stereotypes related to age, gender or migration status, as well as prejudice and all forms of discrimination.
- Ensure the respect, protection and fulfilment of the **human rights of migrants**, regardless of migration status, including through an intersectional lens that addresses the specific risks faced by female migrants, as well as other groups experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination.
- Ensure the **full, equal and meaningful participation** of all groups, including the most marginalized, in decision-making and local planning and governance processes.

### **Building inclusive economies and cohesive societies is crucial to realizing the opportunities and minimizing the costs associated with demographic change**

The effectiveness of policy responses to demographic shifts hinges on the foundations of inclusive economies where everyone—regardless of income, age, sex, race, ethnicity, disability, migratory status or other relevant characteristics—has the opportunity to contribute and thrive, and on cohesive societies where all individuals share a sense of belonging, solidarity and mutual trust and respect. To this end, the UN system will continue to support Member States to:

- Enable **full and productive employment and decent work** for all, recognizing that achieving this requires favorable macroeconomic and business conditions to facilitate firm start-up and expansion, as well as equipping current and future workers to contribute fully to societies through inclusive education, skill-development and labour market policies that address structural and entry barriers for marginalized groups, promote gender equality, respond to different life stages and caregiving responsibilities, and realize the benefits of demographic and gender dividends and “silver economies”.
- Strengthen fiscally sustainable **social protection systems**, including social protection floors, to provide income security and effective access to health services and social care throughout the life course, invest in care services to ensure a fair distribution of resources so that individuals of all ages receive the necessary care and support, and encourage the development of private savings and financial transfer mechanisms.
- Strengthen policies that support older persons in finding and **retaining employment**, and encourage older persons to remain in the workforce, while ensuring that they have access to equitable and sustainable social protection systems if they no longer wish or no longer have the productive capacity to continue working.
- Promote **gender equality** by enacting appropriate policies, including labour, family, financial, and education and training policies, to ensure that women’s engagement in the labour force is

on equal terms with that of men; by recognizing and valuing the unpaid care and domestic work performed by women, while creating an enabling environment that encourages men to assume their fair share; and by creating decent job opportunities for women.

- Create more opportunities for **productive employment**, with fair wages, decent working conditions and greater prospects for career development, including by leveraging digital technologies. This is especially important in those countries where the number of young people entering the labour market is projected to grow rapidly, so that migration can be a choice and not a necessity.
- Enhance the availability and flexibility of **pathways for regular migration** in a manner that facilitates labour mobility and decent work, reflecting demographic and labour market realities, optimizes education opportunities, upholds the right to family life, responds to the needs of migrants and refugees in a situation of vulnerability, and minimizes the “brain drain” for countries of origin; promote the economic integration and social inclusion of migrants in countries of destination, including by combatting discrimination in the workplace, providing access to basic services, and addressing language and other barriers; and support the reintegration of migrants and refugees upon return to their home countries, as well as populations displaced within their home country, by providing access to social protection, employment opportunities and financial services.

### Investing in human capital and healthy ageing across the life course equips societies for demographic change

Sustained investment in human capital throughout the life course—the knowledge, skills, and health of a population—is paramount for effectively addressing the economic and social challenges and opportunities of demographic change. Realizing human capabilities requires early and continuous investment in universal health coverage (including sexual and reproductive health services and addressing non-communicable diseases), nutrition, quality and market-relevant education (from early childhood to higher learning, vocational training and lifelong learning), and decent work for young people, adults and older persons. To this end, the UN system will continue to support Member States to:

- Promote a **life-course approach to health** that supports maternal, newborn and child health, recognizes adolescent health as critical, and invests in adult and older person’s health; ensures access to sexual and reproductive health services; encourages measures to prevent substance abuse; addresses mental health issues; and promotes active and healthy lifestyles and the prevention of non-communicable diseases. The individual and collective benefits of a life-course approach to health range from enhancing productivity during working years to extending active and productive lives, improving overall quality of life, and facilitating more sustainable public health spending across all ages.
- Promote **healthy ageing** through the provision of preventive, treatment and rehabilitation services as well as care and support throughout the life course and ensure these are fully integrated in Universal Health Coverage.
- Strengthen care and support systems to offer **integrated person-centered care** as close as possible to where people live in order to allow people to age in place, assist family members in their caregiving roles—especially women who bear a disproportionate burden—and provide comprehensive services toward the end of life.
- Provide **quality, affordable and market-relevant education**, healthcare and social protection for children and younger persons as a prerequisite for their later successful entry into the labour market and for unlocking a demographic dividend, while also building a robust system of life-long learning opportunities, including with a focus on green and digital skills.
- Facilitate the recognition of **migrants’ skills, qualifications and competences** acquired abroad, and provide inclusive and equitable quality education to all migrant children and young people, including early childhood education, formal schooling and on-the-job and vocational training, language training, digital literacy and access to digital learning opportunities, so that migrant children and youth can overcome social and economic barriers.

- Comply with **ethical recruitment practices** and actively invest in the development and training of skilled labour, especially in countries seeking to recruit workers from abroad, to help ensure that the emigration of highly educated individuals does not stifle sustainable development in home communities or exacerbate inequality between countries in access to human capital.

## Facing future challenges requires fostering sustainable, inclusive and resilient communities

The intertwined challenges of a shifting global population and changing ecosystems demand a fundamental rethinking of how we live. Meeting the needs of current and future generations, especially those living in poverty, without imposing unsustainable and irreversible damages on the natural environment—air, land, water and the climate—is the foremost challenge of sustainable development today and encapsulated in the Sustainable Development Goals. Today, the world population is about 8.2 billion strong, and by the 2080s it is forecast to have grown by an additional 2 billion persons, according to the medium variant of the United Nations' population projections. In this regard, the UN system will continue to support Member States to:

- Shift towards **sustainable consumption and production**, as even shrinking populations will have large environmental impacts if consumption and production patterns are not changed.
- Shift towards a policy and governance approach which prioritizes **investments in social, economic, human and planetary health and well-being** and puts people at the center of policy and decision-making.
- Advance **sustainable urban planning** and design, and build age-friendly, safe, accessible and smart cities to ensure inclusive, resilient communities for all generations.
- Where relevant, foster **innovative approaches for adaptation** to respond to depopulation and ageing of rural areas.
- Enhance the **capacity of communities** to withstand, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses, including conflicts, disasters and the resulting population displacement; integrate demographic intelligence into disaster risk reduction strategies and recovery plans to ensure that risk planning reflects population dynamics, vulnerabilities and resilience capacities; and understand how the needs of conflict-affected populations may vary by age, sex and other characteristics and tailor humanitarian interventions and peacebuilding efforts accordingly.
- Promote **sustainable agriculture** while preserving valuable natural lands, including recognizing and supporting the contributions of indigenous and women farmers, who are often custodians of local ecosystems and biodiversity.
- Conduct detailed mapping of populations exposed to **natural and human-caused hazards**, as well as related environmental, technological and biological hazards and risks, and mapping of local characteristics such as poverty, infrastructure and services to develop effective early warning systems; strengthen disaster preparedness for response and recovery; and guide climate adaptation strategies that anticipate displacement risks and prioritize the voices and needs of women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

## Governance and planning must be strengthened with demographic understanding and foresight

Complete and reliable data on the number, characteristics (including age and sex), and spatial distribution of the population are a prerequisite for effective, evidence- and rights-based policymaking and planning at the national and local levels. The timely production of transparent and replicable projections, at the national and subnational levels, of how population trends are likely to unfold and with what degree of probability are critical for governments and other relevant stakeholders to assess future service needs and demands, plan infrastructure, anticipate the impact of disaster and climate risks and create more adaptive and effective institutions. The UN system stands ready to support Member States to:

- Strengthen their capacity to collect, analyze, disseminate and use **population data**, disaggregated by relevant dimensions, leveraging regional, South-South and triangular cooperation, and complying with the latest international standards and recommendations endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission, including the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, and in line with the right to privacy and data protection standards.
- Develop **national population data systems** that are anchored in official statistics and foundational data sources, such as censuses, surveys, civil registration and vital statistics systems and other administrative sources, and with national data governance mechanisms promoting data integration and interoperability.
- Conduct **population and housing censuses** as part of the 2030 World Population and Housing Census Programme (2025-2034), taking into account the fourth revision of the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, to ensure that policymaking and development planning at national and local levels is based on complete, accurate and timely data, as well as to maintain up-to-date sampling frames for surveys and update population registers.
- Continue to support the fielding of **specialized sample survey** programmes which provide essential demographic and health data and estimates, particularly for low- and middle-income countries where administrative data are not widely available.
- Strengthen **civil registrations** to ensure that all vital events are recorded; that all people, especially children, women and marginalized population groups, have a legal identity to safeguard their fundamental rights and guarantee access to education, healthcare, social security and other essential services; and that vital statistics are used to generate timely, accurate and disaggregated demographic data to support policy-making and programmes.
- More systematically use **population estimates and projections** in the formulation of foresight-driven development strategies, policies, programmes and budgets. Population projections offer important insights into the changing characteristics of the population (notably numbers, age structure, location), and the changing demand for essential goods and services, including health, education, labor markets, pensions, social protection, housing, water and sanitation, infrastructure, digital services and innovations. They thus provide critical evidence for the allocation of public budgets at the federal and local levels, for critical public investments and reforms, and to ensure inclusive access, affordability, accessibility and equitable adoption of these services across different population groups.
- Develop new **demographic indicators and tools** that bring together different data sources, including geospatial information, and dimensions of demographic change, taking into account the diversity of the population, levels of statistical capacity, and the interlinkages with other disciplines and areas of work.
- Enhance **demographic and risk data collection**, interoperability and accessibility, and apply foresight approaches to anticipate future demographic shifts and their implications for resilience and sustainability.

The Common Messages serve as a communications tool to ensure that all UN system entities speak with one voice when engaging with Member States and other stakeholders on critical issues around demographic change, in a way that aligns with global commitments and promotes an integrated, rights-based and gender-responsive approach to demographic changes. Prepared through an inclusive and consultative process by the [HLCP Task Team on Demographic Change](#), under the leadership of UNFPA and UN DESA, the messages were endorsed by the [UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination](#) in October 2025.