

Annex III

United Nations system common messages on policy responses to demographic change

I. Context and background¹

A. The demographic landscape of many countries is changing rapidly

1. Global demographic trends underpin significant transformations that profoundly impact sustainable development. Demographic changes – including changes in the size, age structure and spatial distribution of the population – affect virtually all goals on the development agenda. They affect 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.

2. Against this background it is vital that demographic change receives an explicit focus in the joint support of United Nations 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.** Although the world’s population continues to grow, with an expected addition of 2 billion people over the next 50–60 years, population growth rates vary significantly across regions and countries. Some nations are experiencing rapid growth, while others are facing population decline. By 2054, the population is projected to double in 9 countries, while in 63 countries, currently hosting 1 in 4 people globally, the population size peaked before 2024 and is expected to decline further owing to sustained low fertility and in some cases high levels of emigration.² Fertility rates have reached low or very low levels in a growing number of high- and middle-income countries. More than two thirds of the world’s population now live in countries with a total fertility rate below the replacement level of approximately 2.1 births per woman.³
- **Population ageing.** Population ageing signals the extraordinary collective success in improving the living conditions and health of billions of people around the world. Better sanitation and medical therapies, greater access to education and family planning and strides towards gender equality and women’s empowerment have all contributed to, and in some cases benefited from, the steady move from high to low levels of fertility and mortality, resulting in significant changes in population age structures. Over several decades, both the number and population share of older persons have risen globally, while the share of children and youth has begun to shrink. The global number of persons aged 65 or higher is projected to double over the next 30 years, with the majority

¹ The context and background draw from and further elaborate on content in the terms of reference of the HLCP task team on demographic change of the High-level Committee on Programmes (available at [https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/HLCPISI-CRP.3-Rev1-Draft ToR-HLCP Task Team on Demographic Change.pdf](https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/HLCPISI-CRP.3-Rev1-Draft%20ToR-HLCP%20Task%20Team%20on%20Demographic%20Change.pdf)).

² See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results* (United Nations publication, 2024).

³ Ibid.

residing in low- and middle-income countries.⁴ While many countries still have relatively large youth populations, including most populations in sub-Saharan Africa, ageing is a reality in all countries. Population ageing, in particular if it is occurring very rapidly, presents challenges for societies in adapting social security systems, health services, care and support systems and labour markets, with crucial gender dimensions. For instance, an older woman is twice as likely to live alone⁵ and significantly more likely to lack access to adequate social protection (including pensions) than an older man.⁶ At the same time, population ageing presents opportunities for leveraging the experience and contributions that older persons make to their families, local communities, societies and economies more broadly.

- **Migration and changes in spatial distribution.** While a far greater number of people migrate within countries (in particular from rural to urban areas) than between countries, the number of international migrants has doubled in the past 30 years, reaching 304 million in 2024, with most international migration being intraregional.⁷ The level of forced displacement is the highest on record in the modern era, with more than 123 million people forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, disasters, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order.⁸ Although international migrants constitute a small share of the global population (less than 4 per cent),⁹ their contribution to inclusive growth and sustainable development is substantial in countries of origin, transit and destination. Facilitating safe, orderly and regular migration, while also addressing the vulnerabilities associated with irregular migration, is essential to uphold the human rights of all migrants and to safeguard lives and dignity. Within countries, recent decades have also seen large-scale changes in the spatial distribution of populations, with increasing shares residing in urban areas. Unplanned urban growth and internal migration, often driven by disasters caused by natural hazards and climate change, are key risk multipliers.

B. Limited insights into global demographic trends can risk shaping narratives and policies that fall short of addressing actual needs

3. While the underlying causes and implications of these trends continue to evolve, many Member States are navigating both the long-standing 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

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See <https://data.unwomen.org/features/caring-carers-recognizing-rights-and-contributions-older-women>.

⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, "Older women: inequality at the intersection of age and gender", advocacy brief (2022). Available at https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Advocacy-Brief_Older-Women.pdf.

⁷ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "International migrant stock 2024: key facts and figures" (January 2025). Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>.

⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends Report 2024* (16 June 2024).

⁹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "International migrant stock 2024".

empowerment, in particular regarding sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights and economic participation. 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.

4. Against this background, the United Nations 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. Such discourse must be grounded in established intergovernmental frameworks,¹⁰ avoid all forms of discrimination and inform national development strategies, policies and programmes, thereby strengthening efforts to foster inclusive social and economic development.

5. While effective collaboration on selected demographic topics – such as ageing, youth, migration, sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality – or population groups is well established within the United Nations system, discussions on these issues and their intersections can be strengthened and further integrated into the system’s support to Member States in developing cross-sectoral policy responses to demographic change whether at the global, regional or country level. In order to promote such system-wide coordination and policy coherence, foster inter-agency dialogue and provide practical guidance to United Nations entities for their engagement with Member States and other stakeholders, the High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) has convened a time-bound task team on demographic change. As an initial output, the task team has developed a set of common messages outlining 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. In subsequent phases of the task team’s work, the common messages will serve as the basis for development of a coherent, principled and forward-looking United Nations system-wide approach to demographic change, to enhance the system’s policy coherence, strengthen its advocacy and provide more effective support to Member States in navigating the demographic transformations of the twenty-first century.

II. Common messages

6. The aim of common messages on demographic change was to be concise, clear and actionable. They serve as a communications tool to ensure that all United Nations 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.

7. The common messages, based on data and evidence, underscore the relevance of demographic change for key areas of the United Nations development agenda, as well as the importance of ensuring that any policy response will respect, protect and further the fundamental values and principles on which the United Nations is based, notably the respect for human rights, the advancement of gender equality and the promotion of international cooperation to address the world’s foremost social,

¹⁰ This initiative will build upon and create synergies with key global frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030), the Pact for the Future and the Declaration on Future Generations.

economic, environmental and political challenges. The messages are structured around five cross-cutting thematic areas.

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

8. 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 be aimed at protecting 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. United Nations 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:

(a) To prioritize human rights, dignity and individual well-being in their responses to demographic change, ensuring that people are at the centre 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;

(b) To 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;

(c) To 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 sizeable or sustainable fertility increase;

(d) To create enabling conditions to address the biological, social and economic barriers to childbearing and child-rearing, 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;

(e) To 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;

(f) To 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;

(g) To 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;

(h) To ensure the full, equal and meaningful participation of all groups, including the most marginalized, in decision-making and local planning and governance processes.

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

9. 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 United Nations system will continue to support Member States:

(a) To enable full and productive employment and decent work for all, recognizing that achieving this requires favourable 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”;

(b) To 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;

(c) To 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;

(d) To 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;

(e) To 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;

(f) To 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 combating 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 countries, by providing access to social protection, employment opportunities and financial services.

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

10. Sustained investment in human capital – the knowledge, skills, and health of a population – throughout the life course 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 noncommunicable 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 United Nations system will continue to support Member States:

(a) 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 persons' 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 noncommunicable 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;

(b) To promote healthy ageing through the provision of preventive, treatment and rehabilitation services as well as care and support throughout the life course and ensure that these are fully integrated in universal health coverage;

(c) To strengthen care and support systems to offer integrated person-centred 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 towards the end of life;

(d) To 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 lifelong learning opportunities, including with a focus on green and digital skills;

(e) To 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;

(f) To 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.

D. Facing future challenges requires fostering sustainable, inclusive and resilient communities

11. 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 approximately 8.2 billion strong, and it is forecast that, by the 2080s, it will have grown by an additional 2 billion, according to the medium variant of the United Nations population projections. In this regard, the United Nations system will continue to support Member States:

(a) To shift towards sustainable consumption and production, as even shrinking populations will have large environmental impacts if consumption and production patterns are not changed;

(b) To 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 centre of policy and decision-making;

(c) To advance sustainable urban planning and design, and build age-friendly, safe, accessible and smart cities to ensure inclusive, resilient communities for all generations;

(d) Where relevant, to foster innovative approaches for adaptation to respond to depopulation and ageing in rural areas;

(e) To enhance the capacity of communities to withstand, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses, including conflicts, disaster 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;

(f) To 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;

(g) To 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.

E. Governance and planning must be strengthened with demographic understanding and foresight

12. 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 United Nations system stands ready to support Member States:

(a) To strengthen their capacity to collect, analyse, 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 Statistical Commission, including the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, and in line with the right to privacy and data protection standards;

(b) To 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;

(c) To 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 the national and local levels are based on complete, accurate and timely data, as well as to maintain up-to-date sampling frames for surveys and update population registers;

(d) To continue to support the fielding of specialized sample survey programmes which provide essential demographic and health data and estimates, in particular for low- and middle-income countries where administrative data are not widely available;

(e) To 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 policymaking and programmes;

(f) To 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, labour 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;

(g) To 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;

(h) To 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.