



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on Population and Development

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**General debate on national experience in population matters:  
realizing the future we want — integrating population issues  
into sustainable development, including in the post-2015  
development agenda**

### **Statement submitted by International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### **Demography, the Data Revolution and the Post-2015 Development Agenda**

The International Union for the Scientific Study of Population is the world association of demographers and has long been a partner of the United Nations in the area of population. As such, we are uniquely placed to provide objective scientific evidence on population issues of great policy relevance, to facilitate exchanges on population change and sustainable development, to prepare training resources and to foster the transfer of innovations and best practices across the globe in research and data methodologies, and on the causes and consequences of population phenomena.

In October 2014, the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population convened an expert group meeting on Demography and the Post-2015 Data Revolution. Some of the key ideas that emerged are found below; see [tinyurl.com/oy4n55s](http://tinyurl.com/oy4n55s) for the more detailed position statement submitted to the UN Independent Expert Advisory Group on a data revolution for sustainable development.

- **Demography and the Sustainable Development Goals.** Due to its heavy focus on data quality and how to make the most with limited and imperfect data, demography should play a central role in measuring, analyzing, and projecting mortality, fertility, migration, population size, growth and age structure, and other population and development outcomes. Within this, the demographic approach allows the systemic linkages between population stocks and flows to be better understood and measured. Through doing so, the likelihood of success in designing and implementing development plans and policies is increased.
- **Goals, indicators and trade-offs.** Demographers are concerned that there may be a trade-off between collecting data to measure indicators (e.g., maternal mortality), and collecting data required to assess their causal determinants (e.g., the information needed to develop effective policies to avert maternal deaths). The strong emphasis placed on collecting data for Sustainable Development Goal indicators may effectively de-emphasize other important information such as the determinants of those phenomena. Demographers believe firmly that the highest priority must be given to the accurate measurement and estimation of population size, growth and age structure, because they relate directly to investments in human capital, economic growth, environmental sustainability, population aging and support for vulnerable population subgroups, and migration. In addition, these measures and estimates provide the essential data that will be used in many indicators of progress to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals.
- **Point estimates and uncertainty.** Trends and differentials based on several point estimates of development indicators may be fundamentally misleading, due to uncertainty arising from measurement or statistical error. This is most likely to occur when highly disaggregated indicators are produced (as implied by the 'no-one left behind' principle) or when estimates are based on relatively small populations or observed events. Indicators used to track progress towards

meeting the Sustainable Development Goals should be accompanied by measures of uncertainty surrounding those estimates.

- Empirical vs. model-based estimates To the extent possible, the SDG indicators must be based on hard data as opposed to being overly dependent on model-based estimates, which may be biased or incorrectly parameterized.
- Interoperability. Data users will increasingly need to combine information from various sources with different sampling frames, meaning that methods and mechanisms must be developed to render these data “interoperable”. The effective use of data also requires that users have access to detailed documentation on data collection processes and editing procedures, especially when linked data from different sources are used.
- Data sources and the enduring importance of census data. While demographers applaud the call to make major improvements in national vital registration data systems in the developing world, we also insist on the importance of maintaining efforts to collect census data. Not only do census data provide baseline population statistics for many indicators at levels of fine granularity (e.g. small areas or specific subgroups), they also usually form the basis for drawing nationally representative sampling frames for surveys and other data collection exercises. Census data are likely to be indispensable for controlling for selectivity biases in big data and administrative data, allowing them to be calibrated and used effectively. In addition, small-area census data may be of great value for linking data from different sources and types.
- Ensuring data access. The need to produce finely-grained indicators at different levels of aggregation will require more complete access to microdata than is routinely provided at present. This raises questions of confidentiality, and new methods and processes must be developed and instituted both to provide access to data for users with valid needs for those data and to guarantee confidentiality.
- Institutional capacity and the need to reinvest in training. National Statistical Systems and especially National Statistical Offices must play a central role in collecting, organizing, analyzing and disseminating data, and much attention has rightly been placed on enhancing the capacity of these organizations to play this role. Yet the need for National Statistical Offices to have staff with appropriate skills and expertise has often been neglected in discussions to date. The International Union for the Scientific Study of Population has been concerned for some time at the erosion of demographic skills and knowledge within National Statistical Offices — skills that are essential, and will be increasingly so, to their missions. Significant interventions are urgently required to upgrade skills through both short and long-term training (including in core demographic methods and theory), and to develop effective strategies that promote the retention and personal development of well-trained staff within those organizations.

Demographers are well-equipped to appraise the population-related indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals and to ensure that they are coherent, valid, and operationalizable; indeed, the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population will be working with the Sustainable Development Solutions Network to assess several indicators. The numerators and/or denominators of many other

proposed Sustainable Development Goal indicators also reflect population data, and the suite of tools that demographers routinely use to produce reliable estimates and projections of population variables from limited and defective data can readily be pressed into service of the Sustainable Development Goals. The special skill of demographers lies in their ability to understand the systemic linkages between population stocks and flows across space and time, allowing them to evaluate what is feasible with data collected on human populations. With the massive arrival of new types of data, the need to develop new standards and robust methods for evaluating their quality, along with new ways to incorporate that information into research and policy, is manifest. In this work, the skills and potential contributions of demographers must not be overlooked.

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