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Friends of the Chair group on social and demographic statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2024/312 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Friends of the Chair group on social and demographic statistics, which is submitted to the Commission for discussion and decision.

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Report of the Friends of the Chair group on social and demographic statistics

I. Background

1. Established under the auspices of the Statistical Commission, the Friends of the Chair group on Social and Demographic Statistics was tasked with the review of these statistical areas and to provide strategic recommendations for strengthened social and demographic statistics that better reflect society, as well as its connections with the environment and the economy.

2. At its fifty-second session, the Statistical Commission, in its decision 52/116, tasked the Bureau with initiating a Friends of the Chair process to review the area of social and demographic statistics. At its fifty-third session, the Commission, in its decision 53/105, again called upon the Bureau to initiate the review of the social and demographic statistics through a Friends of the Chair mechanism and to report to the Commission at its fifty-fourth session on the progress made in that connection. At its fifty-fourth session, the Commission, in its decision 54/104, endorsed the establishment of the Friends of the Chair group on social and demographic statistics as a timely initiative to improve this broad area of statistics.

3. At its fifty-fifth session, the Commission, in its decision 55/111, endorsed the proposed work priorities and activities of the Friends of the Chair group, in particular the research towards an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics, including harmonized concepts, statistical definitions, terminology and classifications across subdomains, in line with the group's objective of formulating strategic recommendations.

4. In the same decision, the Commission commended the review of national practices for improved timeliness, frequency, disaggregation and granularity in social and demographic data, which facilitates an intersectional approach to the analysis and agreed on the need to integrate a wide range of data sources, including geospatial information and administrative data, placing special emphasis on issues related to data protection and technological infrastructure.

5. The present report includes a summary of the activities of the Friends of the Chair group in 2024 (see sect. II). Section III contains a description of the preliminary findings of the research towards an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics, and section IV includes information about the proposed way forward for the group in 2025. Section V contains the actions that the Commission is invited to take.

II. Activities of the Friends of the Chair group in 2024

6. In 2024, the Friends of the Chair group welcomed six new Member States[1] – Bhutan, Ghana, Jordan, Morocco, Rwanda and Uruguay – and convened four strategic meetings in February, June, July and November to advance its work plan.

7. Building on the outcomes of its work in 2023 that focused on a mapping and reviewing exercise of global, regional and national methodological developments, tools and solutions, as well as challenges and gaps in sociodemographic statistics, the Friends of the Chair group in 2024, its second year, advanced research towards an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics, as requested

[1] For a complete list of the group's members and observers, see https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/groups/FOCG_SDS/FOC-SDS-ToR-Addendum-June-2024.pdf.

by the Statistical Commission (decision 55/111) and further explored and unpacked the building blocks (people, relationships, outcomes, place and time) identified as core and common components of social and demographic statistics.

8. In particular, to deepen the research on the building blocks, the Friends of the Chair group formed four task teams, each led by two national statistical offices and supported by a regional or international organization and the Statistics Division, as follows:

(a) People, led by Statistics Lithuania, the National Institute of Statistics of Uruguay and the United Nations Population Division;

(b) Relationships, led by Statistics Canada and the Haut-Commissariat au Plan Morocco, and supported by the OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity;

(c) Places, led by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) of Mexico and the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, and supported by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean;

(d) Time, led by the Office for National Statistics of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and BPS Statistics Indonesia, and supported by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

9. Between June and November 2024, each team conducted desk reviews to analyse key elements, challenges, methodologies and tools relevant to their respective building block. They also identified national, regional and global initiatives in social and demographic statistics pertinent to their area of focus, contributed to sprint sessions and collaborated with the Secretariat to prepare a background document synthesizing the ongoing research towards a conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics, which will be published on the Commission's website.[2] Selected findings of that research are also presented in section III of the present report. This research will inform the strategic recommendations of the Friends of the Chair group for strengthened social and demographic statistics that better reflect society and its connections with the environment and the economy.

10. The Friends of the Chair group, in collaboration with the Statistics Division, organized a series of four sprint webinars[3] that engaged participants from over 90 countries. Despite the virtual format, which required early or late attendance for many, the sprints benefited from diverse representation, including presenters and participants from all regions. Participants included national statistical offices, academia and regional and international organizations, with Statistics Poland acting as a discussant to link the topics across webinars and deepen understanding of their interconnections. Moreover, the sprint series was an additional opportunity to elevate the role of social and demographic statistics in the eyes of data users and producers alike, a priority for the group identified in 2023, when the group assessed communication practices, stakeholder engagement and data access modalities across its member countries.

11. The webinars provided valuable insights and facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the common building blocks that underpin social and demographic statistics. The webinar series included:

[2] See background document entitled "Towards an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics", to be made available on the Statistical Commission website.

[3] For more information on the webinars including recordings and relevant materials, see https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/groups/FOCG_SDS/.

(a) “Exploring social relationships and connectedness”, held on 26 September 2024 and attended by 237 participants from 65 countries;

(b) “Building modern and resilient population data systems to enhance data quality, improve cost efficiency and policy relevance”, convened on 3 October 2024, which gathered 252 participants from 66 countries;

(c) “The critical role of information on “places” and geography to improve social and demographic statistics”, organized on 10 October 2024, which engaged 231 participants from 66 countries;

(d) “Data on time – strengthening social and demographic statistics”, hosted on 17 October 2024, which welcomed 209 participants from 62 countries.

12. In 2024, the Friends of the Chair group actively engaged in outreach activities. On 25 February, the group organized a high-level panel discussion on the theme “Key data demands from policymakers in the social and demographic space”, during the fifty-fifth session of the Statistical Commission. In October, the secretariat of the group provided updates on the group’s work to the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities. In addition, several members participated in the seventh World Forum on Well-being of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), contributing to discussions on the critical role of integrated sociodemographic data systems in shaping policies for inclusive and sustainable well-being.

13. As recognized by the Statistical Commission, there are potential synergies between the Friends of the Chair group and the Network of Economic Statisticians, with collaboration between the two groups strongly encouraged. On 13 August 2024, a meeting was held between the Co-Chairs of the Friends of the Chair group and the Bureau of the Network of Economic Statisticians to explore potential collaboration. Focusing on the intersection of social and demographic statistics with economic statistics, several relevant themes and cross-cutting areas of interest emerged: housing, informal work, ageing and household/population wealth, extending beyond income and expenditures. A second meeting was convened on 3 September 2024, aimed at establishing a working arrangement between the Network of Economic Statisticians and the Friends of the Chair group on social and demographic statistics. An ad hoc group, composed of common country members from both groups, discussed mechanisms to ensure that respective outlooks, progress, information needs, priorities and concerns are integrated into each group’s work. It was agreed that the interaction between the Network of Economic Statisticians and the Friends of the Chair group should be viewed not as an outcome-oriented collaboration but as a valuable ongoing conversation that respects each group’s mandates, goals and time frames. The outcomes of the discussions were summarized and shared with members of the Friends of the Chair group and with the newly established Expert Group on Well-being Measurement as background material for their inaugural meeting.[4]

III. Towards an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics

14. Social and demographic data and statistics are essential for measuring and monitoring well-being of individuals, communities and societies at large. They provide the evidence needed to inform the many dimensions or aspects of people’s

[4] For more details, see https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/groups/EGWM/Meetings/egwm-FirstMeeting/Session5-2-Towards-closer-collaboration-between-UN-Network-of-Economic-Statisticians-and-the-FOC-Social-and-Demographic-Statistics_v1.pdf.

lives. Social statistics comprise many subdomains, such as health, education, labour, housing and social protection. When considered together, social outcomes alongside economic and environmental dimensions provide a holistic picture of well-being to policymakers and can guide them in their decisions. At its fifty-fifth session, the Statistical Commission tasked the Friends of the Chair group with advancing research on an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics, a priority identified by the Commission (see decision 55/111), in support of the group's objective of formulating strategic recommendations for strengthened social and demographic statistics. The present section contains a summary of the preliminary findings from that research, informed by national experiences and insights from four sprints held in 2024.

A. Why is a conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics needed?

15. As demonstrated in the mapping exercise conducted by the Friends of the Chair group in 2023, social and demographic statistics are rich with methodological tools catering to a wide range of statistical subdomains. Despite intuitive links among those subdomains, social and demographic statistics have evolved over the years through siloed approaches, resulting in specific and focused frameworks and siloed data infrastructures that lack the integration needed for comprehensive analysis. There is currently no internationally agreed overarching and coherent conceptual logic that formally unifies the various outcomes within the social pillar of statistics. The call for an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics echoes a longstanding interest in conceptualizing and systematizing this statistical pillar, with the aim of placing people at the centre of data systems and key policy decisions. The growing demand for inclusive, granular and fit-for-purpose statistical systems that properly reflect well-being within and across societies and track progress towards inclusive and sustainable development, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, combined with the potential of emerging digital technologies, provide the momentum needed to develop such a framework.

16. The Friends of the Chair group on social and demographic statistics has identified two mutually reinforcing priorities to strengthen those statistics in line with the group's mandate. The first is an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics that would enhance coherence on data and statistics across thematic outcomes in the social sphere by harmonizing concepts, definitions and classifications. This would allow data producers and users to uncover meaningful patterns and relations across social subdomains. The second priority is the development of an integrated social and demographic data infrastructure aligned with this conceptual framework. This infrastructure would enable a consistent, agile and detailed approach to data production, analysis and use, deepening our understanding of the relationships between social phenomena and reinforcing the evidence base supporting the framework. While currently still aspirational, the framework and integrated infrastructure would also promote better horizontal integration of social, economic and environmental data, leveraging granular and geocoded information. This would facilitate comprehensive, intersectional and location-based insights to identify trade-offs and synergies across the three dimensions of sustainable development.

17. Furthermore, the General Assembly, in its resolution 79/1, adopted the Pact for the Future, including the Global Digital Compact and the Declaration on Future Generations, to address escalating conflicts, geopolitical tensions, widening inequality, growing mistrust, stalled progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and the intensifying climate crisis. This landmark declaration outlines clear

commitments and deliverables across key areas, including sustainable development and financing, peace and security, digital cooperation, support for young people and future generations and strengthened global governance. The Pact for the Future emphasizes the urgent need to accelerate efforts towards achieving the Goals, placing people at the centre of all actions and incorporating the needs of future generations into policymaking through long-term, data-driven anticipatory planning. A coherent conceptual framework and an integrated data infrastructure for social and demographic statistics aim to support countries in strengthening the production of reliable, disaggregated data to track progress on the Goals, forecast intergenerational impacts and support evidence-based policies in line with the actions of the Pact. By strengthening the statistical infrastructure, countries will also enhance their ability to identify and respond to pressing issues, ensuring timely and targeted support for those most in need. In its action 53, the Pact for the Future also calls for the development of measures of progress on sustainable development to complement and go beyond gross domestic product (GDP).[5] The Friends of the Chair group aims to identify strategic recommendations that will advance this vision by promoting integrated data systems that more accurately reflect society and its connections with the economy and the environment, supporting the holistic measurement of progress across the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

18. The Friends of the Chair group has emphasized the importance of a flexible, inclusive approach that accommodates diverse national contexts and statistical capacities. Thus, the conceptual statistical framework envisioned by the group is a blueprint to guide the development of an ideal system where social and demographic statistics capture essential population characteristics, offer granular data disaggregation and respond dynamically to societal changes measured as “outcomes” in various subdomains relevant to human well-being. In such a system, data would be collected or compiled frequently, with efforts to minimize duplication across the system, ensuring timely dissemination and broad use in shaping both national and global policies. More timely and frequent collection or compilation would elevate social statistics alongside economic and environmental statistics in decision-making processes.

19. Navigating the path to this ideal, however, requires time and resources, allowing countries to advance at their own pace on the basis of their domestic priorities and the current state of their national statistical systems, while collectively contributing to a shared vision of a robust social and demographic statistics system. Therefore, the conceptual framework is envisioned as a road map for ongoing improvement, guiding national statistical offices towards a progressively adaptable and ambitious statistical system.

[5] In action 53, Heads of State and Government request the Secretary-General to establish an independent high-level expert group to develop recommendations for a limited number of country-owned and universally applicable indicators of sustainable development that complement and go beyond gross domestic product, in close consultation with Member States and relevant stakeholders, taking into account the work of the Statistical Commission, building on the global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to present the outcome of its work during the eightieth session of the General Assembly. They also decide to initiate a United Nations-led intergovernmental process following the completion of the work of the independent high-level expert group in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the Statistical Commission, international financial institutions, multilateral development banks and regional commissions, in line with their respective mandates, on measures of progress on sustainable development that complement or go beyond gross domestic product, considering the recommendations of the Secretary-General’s high-level expert group.

B. What are the key building blocks for more integrated social and demographic statistics?

20. As introduced by the Group in its report to the Commission at its fifty-fifth session, key building blocks – people, relationships, places, time and outcomes – have been identified as essential elements in the ongoing research towards an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics, in line with the group's objective of formulating strategic recommendations for strengthened social and demographic statistics.

21. People are the main unit of measurement for social and demographic statistics, making information on the quantity, characteristics, vital events and movements of people fundamental to the framework. Social statistics are inherently people-centric, and enhanced social statistics should aim to provide evidence that places individuals – reflecting diverse characteristics and intersectional perspectives – at the heart of policymaking. In that context, the Friends of the Chair group has emphasized that strengthening population data systems is essential for understanding not only demographic trends, such as migration patterns and population ageing, but also their drivers and consequences for population groups. In addition, it is crucial for understanding how non-demographic factors – such as environmental, economic, cultural and political systems – interact with demographic events, enabling a more comprehensive and multidimensional analysis. These insights are vital for effective resource allocation, policy formulation and monitoring progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. To ensure that population data systems remain relevant, they must be updated frequently to reflect current demographic realities. This includes incorporating essential population characteristics and ensuring granular data disaggregation by age, sex, geography and other relevant factors in order to accurately capture disparities and address specific needs. Moreover, population estimates serve as denominators for various indicators across the three dimensions of sustainable development, highlighting their importance in informed decision-making and strategic planning. However, population statistics, while necessary, are insufficient. Social statistics are fundamentally about understanding how people are doing (outcomes), how they interact with others and organize themselves formally and informally (relationships), where they live (places) and how their lives are evolving and changing over time.

22. Relationships are a fundamental aspect of human experience, shaping society through diverse connections that range from close family bonds to broader societal institutions. As social beings, individuals are embedded in families, households, communities and institutions, each an essential component of the social fabric. These relationships are multilevel – spanning micro (personal, household and family), meso (community, workplaces) and macro (societal institutions and culture) – and multidimensional, as their extent, function, quality and impact influence well-being at the individual, community and societal levels. Relationships are not only instrumental, supporting positive outcomes in health, life expectancy, education and employment, but also hold intrinsic value, enriching well-being by fostering respect, empathy and belonging. As evolving family dynamics, caregiving roles and urbanization continue to reshape social interactions, comprehensive measurement approaches become essential. To capture fully the breadth of social connectedness, both the quantity and quality of relationships must be measured, as they uniquely predict both objective and subjective well-being. This complexity highlights the need for a nuanced, rigorous statistical framework that recognizes relationships as both an outcome and determinant within social and demographic statistics, across different contexts and population groups.

23. Outcomes are individual and societal conditions assessed through both objective measures, such as life expectancy, and subjective measures, such as life satisfaction. They represent the critical end results of human experience, covering both fundamental survival needs – such as access to food, water and shelter – and broader living standards that extend beyond subsistence. Social statistics often concentrate on measuring various facets of well-being to inform public policies, programmes and services aimed at improving outcomes. Tracking social outcomes across diverse population groups, relationships, time and locations reveals patterns of social and intergenerational inequalities, providing a critical foundation for policies. Well-being measures garner significant attention from decision makers, the media and the public by emphasizing social outcomes alongside economic and environmental conditions. These measures provide a multidimensional perspective, capturing people's ability to meet essential needs, pursue their goals and achieve life satisfaction.

24. Places, or geographic contexts, are essential to understanding social and demographic issues, anchoring human events and relationships within specific territories and regions. Integrating geospatial data into statistical frameworks enables the accurate observation, measurement and analysis of social and demographic phenomena in the locations where they occur. This spatial integration, underscored by the Friends of the Chair group, deepens insights into how geography influences social outcomes, thereby informing policy decisions on issues like inequality, migration, economic opportunity and social mobility. To analyse sociodemographic patterns in relation to geographic context, social and demographic data must be georeferenced. This entails associating statistics with geographic locations, whether as aggregated data – such as mean years of schooling by region – or at the individual level, where each observation includes location variables. Georeferenced data is also the underlying power that enables a more holistic approach by integrating diverse data sources from different statistical domains, such as health, education and demographic information, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of local conditions and uncovering new insights. Moreover, the integration of geospatial data with the broader statistical ecosystem calls for a thorough assessment of compatibility across different statistical processes to support overall statistical coherence. This requires establishing robust information systems and data linkages to create a seamless, interoperable environment that effectively combines statistical and geospatial data. Such integration enhances the quality and accuracy of sociodemographic statistics, including census and survey data, reinforcing the ability of national statistical systems to address complex, place-based policy needs.

25. Time is another organizing element that helps in knitting the conceptual framework together, essential for linking each statistical observation to people, as well as their characteristics, events and relationships, and putting it in a spatial context. Calendar time – periodically repeated observations of outcomes – enables trend analysis and improves the anticipation of future societal needs and challenges while facilitating a thorough understanding of social, environmental and economic dynamics. Adopting a life-course perspective further illuminates how social outcomes evolve over various life stages, emphasizing the interconnectedness of experiences from birth to death. This approach is consistent with the central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to "leave no one behind," and enables research on how events and processes like ageing, family transitions and socioeconomic factors affect outcomes across generations In addition, longitudinal data have the potential to identify individual trajectories, providing critical insights for policymakers on intergenerational inequality, health, migration and social mobility. Longitudinal studies allow for in-depth analyses of changes in well-being, ageing and social outcomes over decades. Time is also a valuable and intangible resource that everyone has in equal measure each day – 24 hours to allocate across various activities. The way time is spent is shaped by factors such as health, energy levels,

weather conditions, available resources, social norms and responsibilities related to both paid and unpaid work. Unlike other assets, time is finite, non-renewable and cannot be accumulated. Time-use data offers a comprehensive view of how individuals distribute their time, providing a nuanced measure of the quality of life, particularly by accounting for well-being beyond traditional economic indicators.[6] As such, it offers deeper insights into the lived experiences that shape well-being and can be considered the "currency" of life.[7]

26. The building blocks identified by the Friends of the Chair group are intrinsically linked. People connect with others in their family, household and communities and are at the core of social relationships. These connections create the underlying structure of social life, as individuals influence the formation, quality and endurance of relationships. Events like births, deaths and migration that form the basis of demographic statistics naturally also shape the fluidity of interpersonal connections over time. Connection and belonging are fundamental human needs, and there is evidence that a lack of them affects social outcomes and even drive individuals to seek community in harmful ways.[8]

27. Places and time are cross-cutting building blocks that link people's social and demographic outcomes within and across other statistical domains. The role of places is critical to understanding the context of people and their relationships, as geographic factors influence where individuals live and work and affect population flows, social mobility and inequality. Geographic settings, such as urban or rural areas, shape individuals' access to resources and services, including healthcare, education and economic opportunities. Places also play a role in structuring relationships within communities: geographic segregation and residential clustering can foster distinct social patterns, influencing family living arrangements, racial or income-based segregation and connections within neighbourhoods. Mapping tools and satellite imagery add insight into those connections by estimating proximity to essential services, tracking community mobility patterns and analysing how physical spaces facilitate or limit social interactions.

28. In a similar way, time plays a central role in measuring changes in both individual characteristics and the quality of relationships throughout people's life course. While some individual traits and relationships remain stable from birth through old age, others change as people move through life stages. For instance, the connections between individuals often strengthen or fade over time, influenced by personal development, family formation or disintegration, ageing and changing social roles. These temporal dynamics are key to understanding complex social areas, such as the evolving needs for care, patterns of intergenerational support and the social implications of ageing and migration, where shifts in relationship structures are deeply linked to people's well-being.

29. When examined alongside places, time enriches the analysis of trends and facilitates the anticipation of future societal needs and challenges. Geographically tagged temporal data can reveal how people's experiences and outcomes, such as access to education, employment, healthcare and affordable housing, vary over time and by location. Time adds a narrative dimension to social and demographic statistics by highlighting trends and patterns, making analyses more relevant and accessible. Time also contextualizes access to critical resources, highlighting how geography and

[6] See E/CN.3/2024/14.

[7] A. Krueger (ed.), *Measuring the Subjective Well-Being of Nations: National Accounts of Time Use and Well-Being* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[8] J. Holt-Lunstad, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience and Director of the Social Connection and Health Laboratory, Brigham Young University, during a webinar on the theme "Exploring social relationships and connectedness".

timing intersect to affect access to timely services, particularly during crises like natural disasters or health emergencies.

C. What are the current challenges in the key elements of the conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics and its operationalization?

30. The initial findings from the ongoing research on a conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics highlight that the lack of cohesive integration of social data has historically hindered progress, as social statistics have tended to favour a detailed focus within thematic areas and/or population subgroups. The social pillar of statistics covers a wide range of disciplines, including demographics, public health, criminology, labour market economics, sociology and more. Similar concepts are often approached from different perspectives, and the absence of a shared taxonomy or an overarching framework explaining the interactions between thematic domains have been a key challenge. The inherent complexity of the social statistics pillar means that advancing a coherent conceptual framework will require time, efforts and significant resources. The initial research findings on each key element/building block are summarized below.

31. In terms of data integration, the development and maintenance of a high-quality population spine is foundational, but countries face significant challenges, especially for countries relying on full-field enumeration censuses as the primary source of population data. While these censuses yield essential insights, they are resource-intensive, complex and are typically conducted only every 10 years, resulting in substantial intervals between data updates. Logistical difficulties, particularly in reaching remote and hard-to-reach populations, further affect data quality and completeness. To address those limitations, many countries are increasingly incorporating administrative data sources and modelling techniques as supplementary or alternative approaches. However, integrating administrative sources into census processes presents challenges, notably in defining an accurate base population amid high population mobility and diverse data requirements. Public scepticism over the use of administrative data underlines the need to develop rapid quality assurance measures to build public trust. Managing the integration of administrative data into census files requires meticulous oversight, with predetermined inclusion thresholds to prevent arbitrary decisions. The lack of unique identifiers adds complexity, and the variability in the quality of administrative records necessitates additional guidance for users to effectively navigate this data variability. Improving international migration data remains a challenge shared by many countries. Disparities in data quality and population estimates across countries further complicate international comparability, as each country faces unique obstacles in defining place of usual residence, accurately identifying household members, capturing comprehensive migration data and ensuring the accuracy of vital statistics.

32. The inherently complex and multifaceted nature of human interactions, which are influenced by personal, societal and environmental factors, poses several challenges to measurement. Relationships not only serve as pathways to a range of social and demographic outcomes, but are also outcomes themselves, complicating efforts to standardize measurement across contexts. These complexities require a robust conceptual framework to guide measurement, as relationships vary widely and are often difficult to unpack. Limited attempts have been made to address systematically how social and demographic statistics should approach relationships, resulting in a lack of harmonization in concepts, classifications, definitions and methodologies. Varied approaches to questionnaire design, response options and

recall periods in household surveys further hinder consistency, making cross-country or longitudinal comparisons of relationship data challenging.

33. Integrating sociodemographic and geospatial information, although recognized as essential to advance integrated sociodemographic statistical systems, presents several significant challenges. Limited technical expertise in many national statistical offices impedes the adoption of advanced approaches, such as small area estimation or spatial data analysis, which are crucial for producing place-based sociodemographic statistics using geographic information systems and remote sensing. Resource constraints further hinder progress, as implementing geospatial technologies and integrating spatial data into sociodemographic statistics require substantial financial investment, technical resources, like high-quality satellite imagery and geographic information system software, and comprehensive training, which may not be feasible in resource-constrained settings. Inconsistent geographic data coverage remains a pressing issue, particularly in rural and developing regions where data on households, infrastructure and environmental factors may be incomplete or outdated. In addition, challenges in data integration and interoperability arise as geographic and sociodemographic data are often collected with varying standards, formats and geographic units, complicating the linkage of these datasets. Privacy concerns also escalate as data is disaggregated to finer geographic levels, increasing the risk of identifying individuals and necessitating robust protocols and methodologies to protect confidentiality and sensitive information.

34. High-quality time series data remain critical for understanding life-course transitions and projecting societal needs, particularly in data-scarce regions, where tracking multigenerational households poses further analytical challenges. Some longitudinal datasets could be established by linking data from multiple census rounds with administrative records, as well as demographic and migration statistics databases. Nevertheless, establishing and updating longitudinal datasets faces hurdles such as participant attrition, timeliness of data, privacy concerns and high administrative barriers to researcher access. In addition, high death rates and migration in older populations can complicate the continuity of these studies, requiring the use of proxy informants or other adaptive strategies to gather reliable data. Historically, social statistics have often relied on relatively infrequent, in-depth analyses, sometimes conducted on an ad hoc basis in response to shifting policy priorities and resource availability. This approach has made it challenging for certain subdomains of social statistics to establish the consistent and frequent time series – and shared international periodicity – that economic data typically enjoys. Such consistency generates network effects, enabling deeper insights into economic phenomena, a model that social statistics could benefit from adopting.

35. Overall, as previously mentioned, social concerns are interconnected and require a holistic perspective in data production, analysis and dissemination to provide policymakers the integrated evidence they need to better integrate their policies and improve well-being for all. The absence of an overarching framework for social and demographic statistics to guide data integration across various sources and statistical pillars perpetuates the siloed approach and inconsistent quality standards impeding effective utilization. Developing such a framework and promoting its operationalization require time, resources, partnerships and a change in culture and mindset among both data producers and data users.

D. How do we advance towards an integrated system of social and demographic statistics?

36. The present section includes a description of some of the preliminary understanding among members of the group on how to advance towards a more integrated system of social and demographic statistics, based on the research and the sprints organized by the group in 2024.

37. A well-defined conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics is essential in guiding the development of an integrated sociodemographic data system. By describing a coherent structure, the framework clarifies key building blocks and their relations, as well as the standards necessary for a cohesive approach to data collection, compilation and integration. The conceptual framework promotes alignment in statistical concepts, definitions, classifications and periodicity. This alignment guides the development of a data infrastructure that brings together data from different sources, reducing duplication and filling data gaps while enhancing the timeliness and accuracy of sociodemographic insights. Ultimately, a robust conceptual framework lays the foundation for an integrated system that supports cross-cutting analysis and enables policymakers to respond more effectively to complex societal issues at both the national and the global levels.

38. Rather than seeing their social and demographic statistical systems as static, national statistical offices are encouraged to approach their development by advancing incrementally toward greater integration and efficiency. Through continuous improvements, national statistical offices could track social outcomes more effectively, optimize public resource management and equip policymakers with insights to address complex and evolving challenges.

39. Timely sociodemographic data remains a priority, as outdated information can lead to ineffective interventions, while up-to-date data strengthens decision-making and policy outcomes. Differentiating between timely data and frequently collected data is essential to address policy-relevant reporting gaps, particularly in social indicators such as time use. Advancing towards more timely social data through innovative approaches like nowcasting and leveraging technology can improve the relevance and accessibility of information, ensuring that services – such as healthcare, education and housing – are effectively targeted to the populations most in need.

40. Quality is fundamental to any statistical system, with data integration and quality mutually reinforcing each other. Harnessing advancements in information technology infrastructure, computational power, geospatial integration and modelling techniques can significantly improve data quality and address critical data gaps. Achieving finer data disaggregation yields valuable insights but requires careful management of privacy concerns. A balanced approach integrates diverse data sources, robust methodologies and flexibility for innovation, while international statistical standards ensure comparability across regions and over time. Experimentation and active stakeholder engagement further support a robust, integrated social and demographic statistics system.

1. Adoption of international statistical standards

41. Consistent application of international standards in terms of statistical concepts, definitions and classifications is essential for ensuring data comparability across geographic levels and over time. Frameworks like the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses and the Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration and Temporary Mobility are instrumental in guiding national statistical offices to improve demographic data coverage, accuracy and granularity, down to the smallest geographic levels. Equally important is the

standardization of definitions for social groupings, such as households and families, to enhance the utility of integrated datasets. However, further global efforts are needed to develop standards that capture the multifaceted nature of social relationships, supporting countries in measuring and analysing complex social dynamics. In addition, standards like the "Degree of Urbanisation",[9] which enables the classification of areas on an urban-rural continuum and the Global Statistical Geospatial Framework,[10] which outlines key phases for integrating statistical and geospatial data, are critical for linking sociodemographic information to specific geographic levels, thereby supporting precise, place-based policy decisions. The adoption of common geographies for data dissemination, including for example slum areas and indigenous territories, also supports the integration of comparable data, enabling more meaningful statistical interpretations that accurately reflect the nuances of distinct geographic areas.

2. Leveraging technological solutions

42. Digital-first, multi-mode data collection methods and advanced data integration systems, moving more and more towards register-based data, are transforming population and social statistics systems. These technologies enable real-time monitoring of data collection, facilitate early detection of anomalies and support timely corrective actions, ultimately enhancing the accuracy, timeliness and reliability of social and demographic statistics.

3. Strengthening data infrastructure and governance

43. As countries progressively incorporate administrative data sources and integrate these with survey and census data, strengthening data governance and infrastructure is essential. While full register-based approaches may not be feasible or desirable for all countries, strategically leveraging administrative data can effectively address data gaps and produce timely and reliable population estimates, and improve the coherence of social statistics. Building statistical capacity, upskilling and reskilling personnel and enhancing data infrastructure to support an integrated approach – linking or merging censuses, surveys and administrative records – remains vital. In addition, countries should establish data governance frameworks, implement robust business process models for data appropriation and develop mechanisms for data sharing, collaboration and dissemination to ensure transparency and accountability in policy use.

4. Integrating geospatial data

44. Expanding the use of geospatial information within national statistical systems enhances the capacity for comprehensive, location-sensitive analyses of social and demographic data. Leveraging emerging technologies and innovative geocoding methods enable the production of geospatially tagged data, reinforcing the importance of maintaining a national address file as a foundational resource. Such a file allows for the effective integration of various data sources, including administrative records, creating a cohesive and detailed geographic framework for social and demographic statistics. The Global Statistical Geospatial Framework facilitates this integration by applying its five principles and supporting elements to produce harmonized and standardized geospatially enabled statistical data. Investments in geographic information system software, advanced data management skills and privacy-

[9] For more information, see the background document "A recommendation on the method to delineate cities, urban and rural areas for international statistical comparisons", available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/51st-session/documents/BG-Item3j-Recommendation-E.pdf.

[10] For more information, see "The Global Statistical Geospatial Framework", available at https://ggim.un.org/meetings/GGIM-committee/9th-Session/documents/The_GSGF.pdf.

preserving techniques are essential to incorporating these new approaches into statistical and geospatial production processes.

5. Utilizing innovative methods to improve data quality and integration

45. To improve the quality of population estimates from administrative records, decision rules are applied to ensure that only individuals who meet predefined usual residence criteria are included. Methods like the “signs of life” approach have proved effective for identifying individuals actively residing in a territory, minimizing overcoverage in statistical registers. Similarly, some countries have developed methodologies to identify connections between individuals – such as marital status, shared child, or joint financial commitments – to better estimate household composition and relationships.

46. Modelling techniques are essential in social and demographic statistics, especially when traditional data sources alone cannot provide detailed local-level insights. Harnessing the increasing availability of data and computational power, countries can apply spatial estimation and geospatial data modelling to enhance the accuracy and granularity of statistics. Small-area estimation models are particularly valuable, as they combine survey data with administrative records, census data and geographic information to improve the precision of estimates for small areas or population subgroups, addressing challenges posed by limited survey samples and declining response rates in household surveys in many countries.

6. Exploring and scaling up alternative data sources and innovative methods

47. To produce more timely social statistics, nowcasting methods can be explored to generate recent data points based on time series models. These methods provide timely estimates in the absence of official data, supporting urgent decision-making and responding to evolving population needs.

48. Alternative data sources offer immense potential for filling critical gaps in social and demographic statistics, helping to meet the rising demand for timely, granular and dynamic information. Satellite imagery offers powerful capabilities for estimating population distribution, tracking land use and assessing proximity to essential services like schools and healthcare facilities, all at a granular geographic scale. Mobile phone data captures dynamic patterns of population mobility and migration in near-real time, offering insights into the spatial and temporal aspects of human movement that traditional surveys might miss. Social network datasets can reveal patterns of community connectivity and social structures, allowing for more nuanced analyses of social relationships, although privacy and data governance frameworks are essential. Web-scraped data from online sources provide a cost-effective means of gathering indicators on public sentiment, social trends and demographic behaviours. Similarly, citizen-generated data complement official statistics, especially in hard-to-measure topics like violence against women and marginalized communities, adding rich grass-roots perspectives to traditional data sources. Together, these innovative data sources enhance the quality, relevance and responsiveness of social and demographic statistics.

49. To link sociodemographic and economic data, national transfer accounts offer a dynamic view of the economic lifecycle and the redistribution of resources across age groups. Such accounts illustrate how consumption exceeds production during infancy and old age, highlighting the net contributions of working-age adults. Integrating these lifecycle insights into social and demographic statistics can inform policies on ageing populations and optimize resource allocation, such as focusing healthcare spending on preventive measures. Adding a time-use dimension to national transfer

accounts enables gender analysis, helping to reveal productive activities like the provision of unpaid household services, overlooked in national accounts.

7. Engaging stakeholders

50. Engaging stakeholders across the data ecosystem – including data producers and users, such as policymakers, media and the general public – is crucial for creating a cohesive and effective data environment. While national statistical offices are central to producing social and demographic statistics, a collaborative approach that includes contributions from diverse actors, such as civil society organizations, academia and private sector entities, is essential to meet a wide range of information needs. These partners best address certain areas – academia, for example, often plays a key role in conducting in-depth quantitative research. Establishing partnerships and effective data governance builds trust in sociodemographic data as a foundation for policy, enabling evidence-based decision-making and securing resources to strengthen data systems. Collaboration through multidisciplinary teams – including social statisticians, demographers, economists, data scientists and experts in geomatics, geography and data analysis – builds a common vocabulary and terminology, enhances integration and leverages the unique expertise of each contributor, ultimately improving data quality and relevance.

51. It is also important to enhance communication strategies and invest in building capacity for analysing integrated sociodemographic data alongside geographic information. Geospatial visualizations, such as dashboards and geo-visual frameworks, play a vital role in aiding policymaking by simplifying the interpretation of large, complex datasets and highlighting key geographic components. Utilizing visualization tools and transforming data into accessible compelling narratives promote understanding and informed decision-making.

52. Engaging data users throughout the data value chain ensures that data collection aligns with well-defined objectives, fostering more targeted data initiatives. Producing comprehensive metadata enhances transparency and usability, while collaboration among Governments, researchers and civil society organizations improves data accessibility and application. Encouraging researchers to utilize longitudinal data to explore various aspects of population and social outcomes, coupled with regular interactions to ensure data clarity, further enriches the data landscape and supports the effective use of sociodemographic information.

IV. Proposed activities of the Friends of the Chair group for 2025

53. The Friends of the Chair group underscores the importance of advancing research towards an overarching conceptual framework and integrated data infrastructure to organize social and demographic statistics. This effort will inform the group’s objective of formulating strategic recommendations for strengthened social and demographic statistics that better reflect society and its connections with the environment and the economy. The group acknowledges, however, that the full development of a conceptual statistical framework and related integrated data infrastructure will require time, significant resources and the active engagement of many stakeholders, and is beyond the group’s current mandate.

54. In 2025, the group is proposing to continue research on the potential of the four building blocks (people, relationships, place and time) as the new lens to better organize, harmonize and integrate data for social and demographic outcomes. This will help the group to identify strategic recommendations to advance the development of a cohesive conceptual framework and supporting data infrastructure for social and

demographic statistics. In particular, a core group of members within the Friends of the Chair group will advance research on the overarching conceptual framework and document their findings in a draft report.

55. In 2025, the group will also prioritize supporting ongoing initiatives aligned with action 53 of the Pact for the Future, which focuses on measuring sustainable development progress beyond GDP and will be ready to contribute to the work of the independent high-level expert group established by the Secretary-General. The group will collaborate with relevant bodies, including the newly formed Expert Group on Well-being Measurement. The Co-Chairs of the group, along with the Secretariat, stand ready to facilitate the exchange of progress and insights.

56. The Friends of the Chair group will prepare a final report for presentation to the Statistical Commission at its fifty-seventh session, in March 2026. That report will provide strategic recommendations applicable at the global, regional and national levels, tailored to statistical systems at various levels of development. The recommendations will focus on enhancing social and demographic statistics to better reflect societal issues and their interconnections with environmental and economic dimensions. Drawing on the ongoing initial research on a conceptual framework and data infrastructure for integrated social and demographic statistics, as well as relevant country experiences, the report will address current challenges, including the need to adapt to evolving user needs, identify scalable solutions and highlight areas requiring further technical work.

57. Given the group's time-bound and strategic nature, it is essential to recognize that further work, beyond the group's mandate and timeline, will need to be undertaken at the technical level in order to implement the strategic recommendations expected from the Friends of the Chair group.

V. Actions to be taken by the Statistical Commission

58. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To take note of and express its views on the activities and progress of the Friends of the Chair group in 2024;**

(b) **To express its views on the proposed programme of work and deliverables for 2025, in particular:**

(i) **Advancing and documenting the research towards an overarching conceptual framework for social and demographic statistics, including its description, the connections among its building blocks and its proposed use to harmonize and integrate the many subdomains of social and demographic statistics, while also outlining related data infrastructures to better organize and integrate these statistics;**

(ii) **Developing strategic recommendations building on the research conducted by the Group since its inception in 2023, including findings on the overarching conceptual framework, for improved social and demographic statistics that better reflect societal issues and their connection to the economy and the environment.**