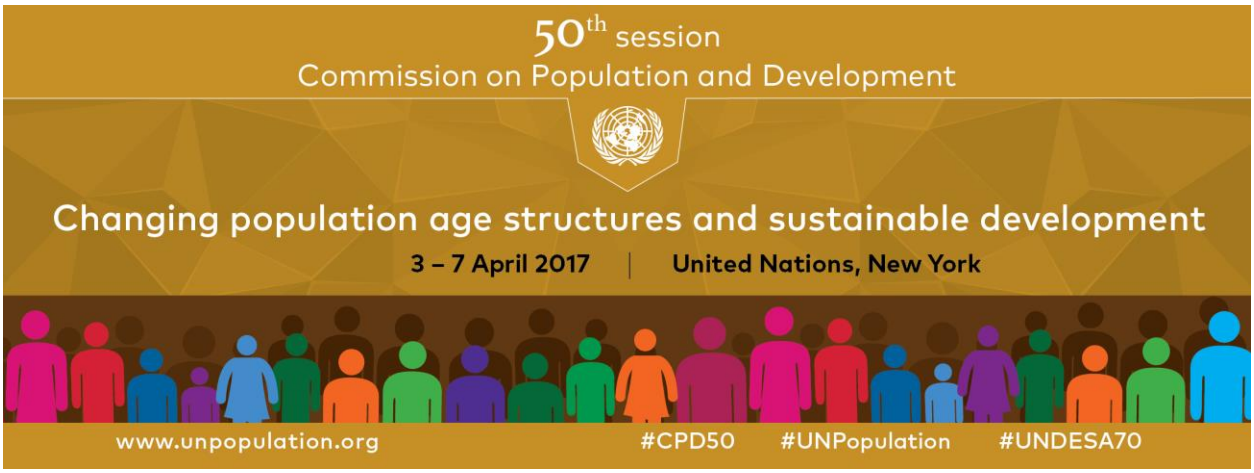


Contribution of the 50th session of the Commission on Population and Development to the 2017 high-level political forum on sustainable development

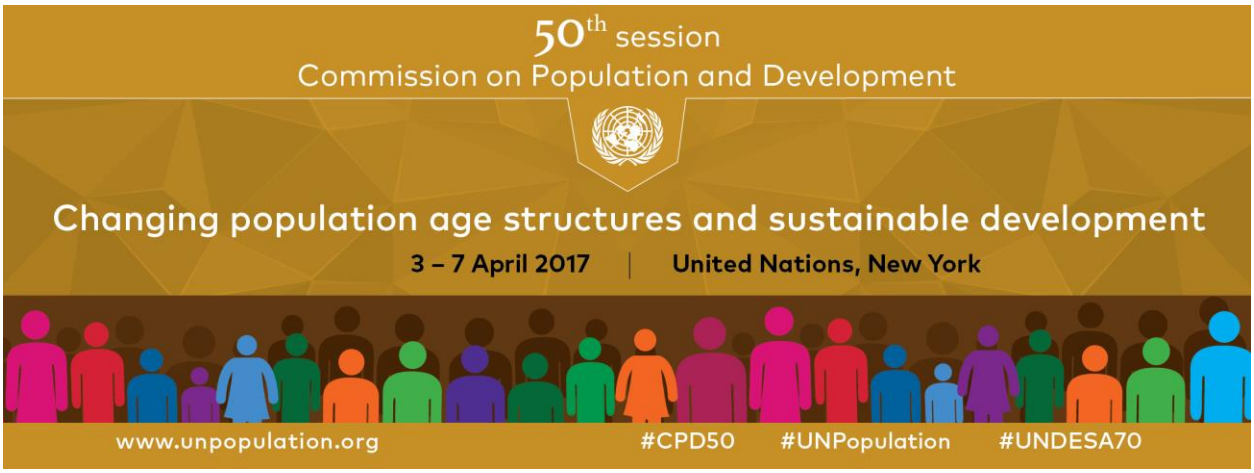
New York, 10-19 July 2017

The Commission on Population and Development held its 50th session on 15 April 2016 and from 3 to 7 April 2017. Its special theme was "Changing population age structures and sustainable development". This note highlights contributions by the Commission to the high-level political forum on sustainable development, meeting in New York from 10 to 19 July 2017 under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, with a focus on "Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world". This note contains key messages from (a) two reports of the Secretary-General prepared for the 50th session, (b) presentations by Member States and invited speakers during the plenary session, including national voluntary presentations by Member States, and (c) informal consultations on a draft resolution on the theme of the session, which were held in parallel to the plenary meetings.

1. An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind" at the global level

During the 49th session of the Commission on Population and Development in April 2016, Member States reaffirmed that the Commission's primary purpose is to monitor, review and assess the implementation of the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The Commission also affirmed that it would contribute to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development within its existing mandate, and that the contribution of the Commission should reflect the integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as their interlinkages.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development underscored the essential linkages between population and development, emphasizing that population, poverty, patterns of production and consumption and the environment are so closely interconnected that none can be considered in isolation. In this context it is relevant to recall Principle 2 of the Programme of Action, which states: "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature. People are the most important and valuable resource of any nation. Countries should ensure that all individuals are given the opportunity to make the most of their potential. They have the right to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, including adequate food, clothing,

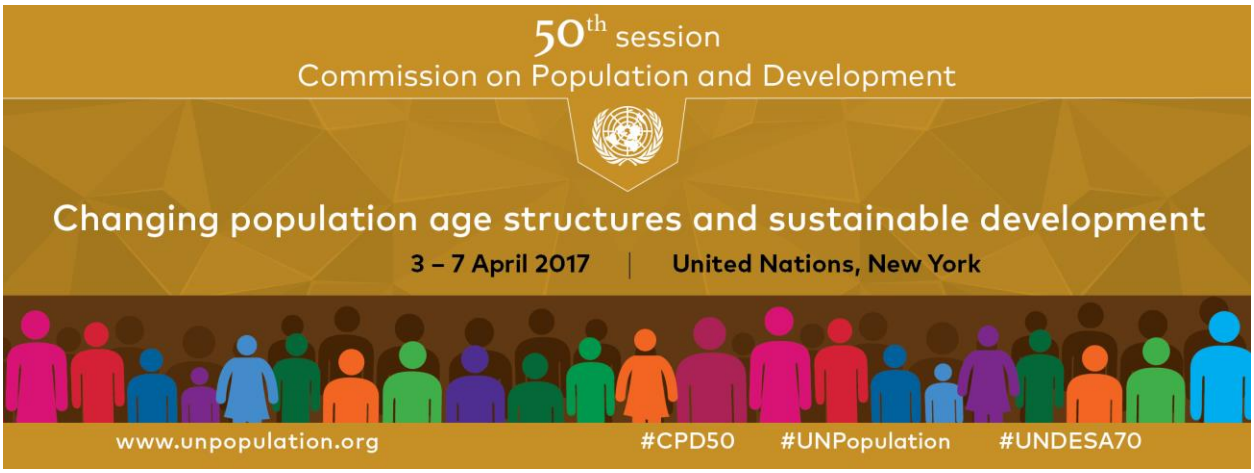


housing, water and sanitation." Further, Principle 7 of the Programme of Action proclaims: "All States and all people shall cooperate in the essential task of *eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development*, in order to decrease the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of the people of the world …." [emphasis added]. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda has focused global attention on the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind", and is grounded in the respect for human rights which has been at the centre of the Programme of Action for more than two decades.

Across the board, the 50th session of the Commission on Population and Development emphasized that taking account of changing population age structures as part of development planning is essential for achieving the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the eradication of poverty and ensuring that no one is left behind.

The reports of the Secretary-General documented the changes taking place in the age distribution of human populations. On a global scale, these changes include a decline in the number of children and youth as a proportion of the world's population, coupled with a persistent youth bulge predominantly in developing regions of the world, along with stability in the relative size of the working-age population and rapid growth in the share of older persons. In light of these changes, which inevitably accompany the historic transition toward longer lives and smaller families, the reports draw attention to a range of policies that can contribute to sustainable development and to the eradication of extreme poverty (SDG target 1.1).

In their statements, Member States referred to some of these policies. For example, countries with high levels of fertility described policies to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services (target 3.7) and reproductive rights (target 5.6); to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation (target 5.3); and to expand investments in human capital through programmes to support quality education and lifelong learning (Goal 4) and healthy lives and well-being for all (Goal 3), especially for children and youth. For countries at intermediate or advanced stages of population ageing, relevant policies include: promoting female labour force participation and productive employment, ensuring access to affordable child-care and parental leave for both mothers and fathers, investing in education and health throughout the life course, and expanding the coverage of pension systems to ensure a minimum level of income security for all older persons, in accordance with the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and with SDG target 1.3 on implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, and target 5.4 on recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies.



A final area of focus related to "leave no one behind" was the centrality of strong population data systems to identify those who are furthest behind, as well as the conditions and drivers associated with disparities they face. The 2020 round of censuses, together with strengthened civil registration and vital statistics systems, internationally comparable thematic survey programmes and triangulation with other sources of data are considered essential to realizing the objective of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first.

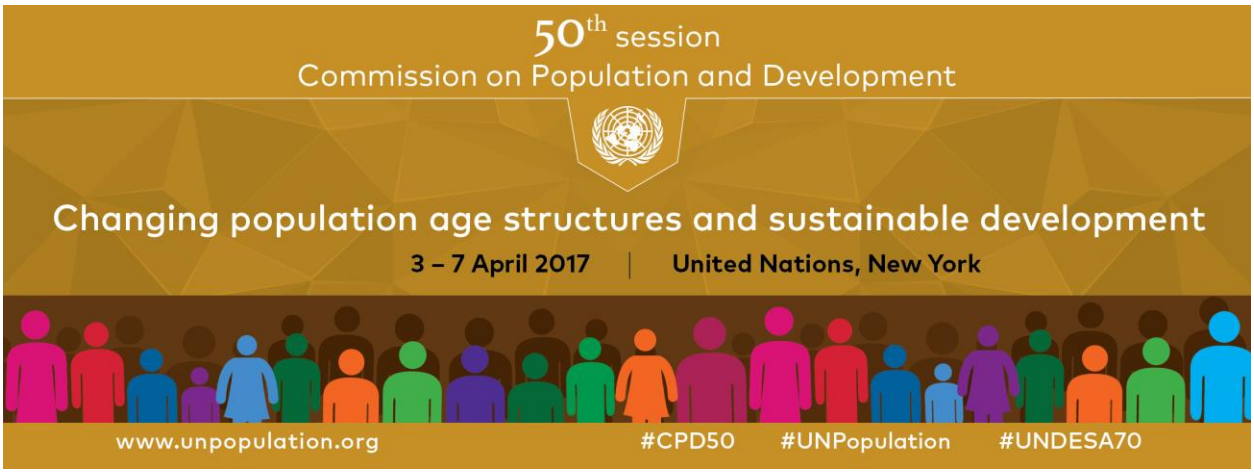
Overall, a review of the Commission's work on this topic reveals that during the recent session Member States and the Secretary-General called for actions that would contribute to the achievement of Goals 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10 and 17.[1]

2. The identification of gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges

Throughout the 50th session, Member States emphasized that changing population age structures from younger to older ages have a larger impact on two population segments that are vulnerable by virtue of their age: children and older persons. Both children and older persons are highly dependent on public and private mechanisms of social and economic support. In societies with weak support systems, poverty tends to be much higher than average among persons in these two age groups. Changing demographic trends pose significant challenges to the sustainability of the existing support systems. There was also significant discussion of support systems for adolescents and youth, who experience unique challenges associated with transitions to adulthood, linked to health, education, and employment. Supporting and empowering this age group are essential for the realization of the demographic dividend.

Member States emphasized that girls and women require special attention. For example, they require protection from early and forced marriage, early childbearing, unsafe abortions, violence, discrimination and malnutrition, and need to be given access to quality education and health care services, including for sexual and reproductive health. Later in life, women require equal access to continuing education and health care services, equal opportunities in the labour market and overall gender parity in the work force. Member States also underscored that women should be protected from all forms of violence and discrimination, that they have the right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, and that the

[1] The relevant targets were as follows: Target 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.7, 3.8, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 8.3, 8.5, 8.6, 10.2, 10.3, 10.7, and 17.18.



empowerment of girls and women, and gender equality are at the centre of both the Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda.

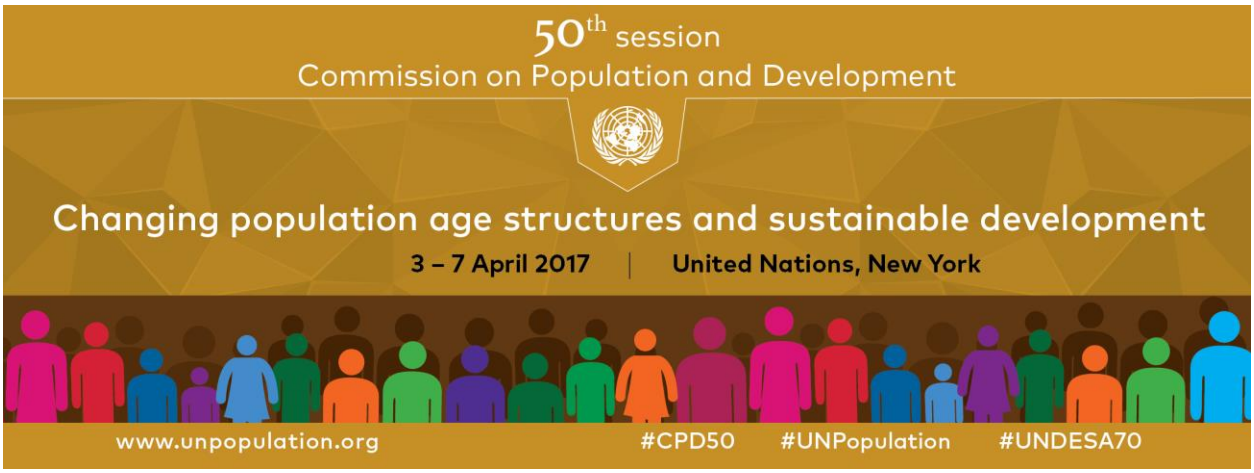
Member States recognized that to fulfil the pledge of leaving no one behind, it is important to formulate policies and assess progress made towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals while distinguishing people in different age groups, in particular children, youth and older persons. To document changes in population age structures and to evaluate the impacts of those changes, age-and sex-disaggregated data are essential. Moreover, building the evidence base requires not only data collection but also data analysis. In this regard, there is an urgent need to strengthen national and sub-national data systems, including censuses, civil registration, vital statistics and household surveys. In addition, Member States noted that these data and analyses should inform national development plans that should be fact-based, forward-looking, and that the drafting of such development plans should include relevant stakeholders.

Member States pointed out that since demographic challenges are often global in nature, cooperation between actors at a wider level would be needed. International partnerships are useful in finding common solutions for common problems and promoting social innovation, by testing new policy approaches since social policies require constant adaptation to new contexts and challenges. Thus, international cooperation and partnerships to accelerate the attainment of the objectives of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Sustainable Development Goals are needed. In this regard, and with a focus on national challenges, some Member States from less developed regions called on Member States from more developed regions to continue to support them in reaping the benefits of the demographic dividend and in better preparing for the ageing of their populations. They also called for continued South-South cooperation.

3. Valuable lessons learned on eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity

In the context of the theme of the 50th session, Member States stressed that the full implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action remains crucial for ending hunger and poverty in all its forms and leaving no one behind.

Member States recognized that changes in the population age distribution reflect great achievements, including increased survival and longer life spans, as well as the greater ability of individuals and couples to control the number and timing of any children they may wish to have. At the aggregate level, falling levels of fertility in some countries, leading to larger proportions of the population in the working age range, were opening an important demographic window of opportunity that might bring increased prosperity through faster growth of income per capita and



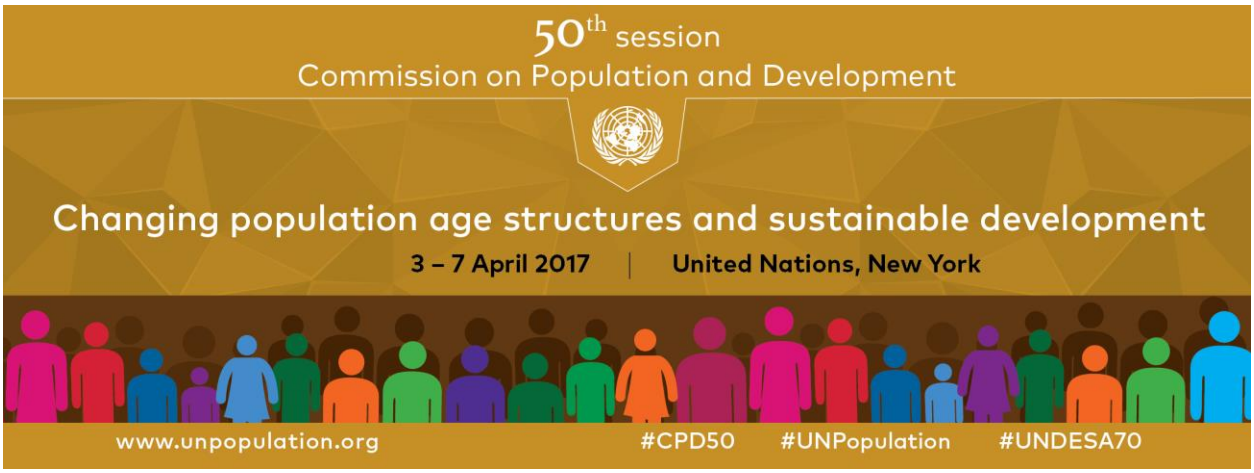
thereby contribute to the eradication of poverty, the promotion of prosperity, and the social and economic sustainability of those populations as they age. The demographic dividend is, however, not automatic, and requires some critical enabling conditions. The future population of workers must be empowered by having access to quality health care, education and opportunities for employment.

Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment are essential for reaping the demographic dividend and advancing sustainable development, including the eradication of poverty. Member States emphasized the importance of equal representation of men and women in the labour market and in the educational system and of providing support to families, in particular women, to achieve better work-life balance. Universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, need to be improved, and all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls need to be eliminated. Girls and women who enjoy equal opportunities compared to boys and men, and who are fully empowered, can become productive and fulfilled members of society and contribute to a world where no one is left behind. Further, the unique impact of female empowerment and gender equality in the household has been well documented, including its impact on breaking inter-generational cycles of poverty.

Promoting active ageing, protecting older persons, providing access to long-term care, and enacting pension and social security reforms have been important in many countries that support older persons to lead healthy, productive, participatory, worthy and independent lives. Some Member States reported on active-ageing initiatives and on the importance of protecting older persons from discrimination and abuse. There was also discussion about providing older persons with social assistance and long-term care, which allow them to remain active and healthy members of society.

4. Emerging issues likely to affect the realization of poverty eradication and achieving prosperity

Some Member States highlighted that migrant and refugee movements present a major challenge for countries of destination, by placing social, environmental and economic pressures on host communities. The large influx of migrants and refugees in some countries in recent years has, for example, altered the age distribution of the population by increasing the number of young and middle-aged persons. In some countries, the pressure on natural resources as well as the demand for social services, such as education and health care, were increasing due to the large influx of refugees and migrants. Some Member States also noted that recent migrant and refugee



movements were affecting the culture, customs and traditions in host countries. There was also pressure on labour markets, with a growing number of young refugees seeking employment in the informal sectors of the economy, sometimes competing with low-skilled native-born workers.

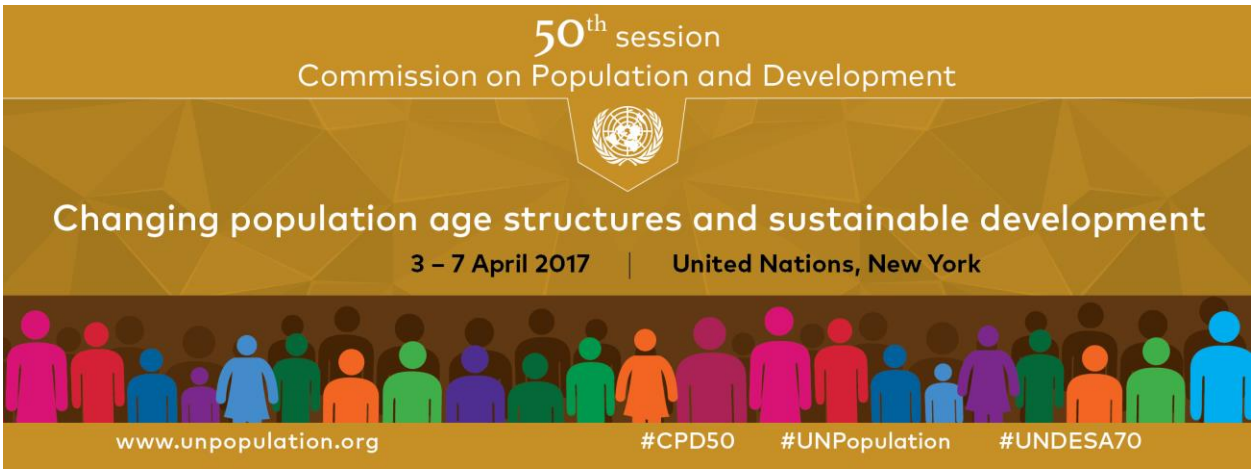
However, Member States also remarked on the skills and experiences of migrants and refugees, which could benefit the labour market, and society in general, in countries of destination. Overall, Member States called on the international community to come together by providing not only short-term humanitarian assistance but also long-term development assistance that would benefit the migrants and refugees and the host communities. Member States expressed their support for protecting and promoting the human rights of all migrants and for facilitating safe, orderly and regular migration, recognizing that international migration tends to make the populations of host societies younger and thus attenuates the speed and impact of population ageing.

Some Member States also remarked on the challenges linked to climate change and pointed out that children, youth, girls, women, older persons and persons with disabilities, in particular those living in poverty, experience differential, often heightened, climate-related vulnerabilities. They called on the international community to make strong commitments to mitigate climate change and to establish participatory adaptation mechanisms, plans and programmes to reach the most vulnerable people affected by climate change.

A few Member States remarked that security concerns and the threat of terrorism have made it difficult to sustain progress in social and economic development. Security, they noted, is the bedrock that underlies development, including for the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Maybe here we can a bit reflect of the importance of goal 16, quite related.

5. Areas where political guidance by the high-level political forum is required

Poverty eradication and ensuring that no one is left behind required two broad types of action: (1) raising income levels, and (2) providing access to social protection for all, especially for the most vulnerable population groups. In addition, the high-level political forum should advocate for investments in health and education, in particular for children and youth as important agents of change, with a view to addressing multidimensional deprivations and harnessing the demographic dividend, and for expanded support for gender equality and empowerment of women, so that countries can benefit fully from the productive capabilities of women, which will assist in harnessing the full potential benefits of changing population age structures, including the demographic dividend.

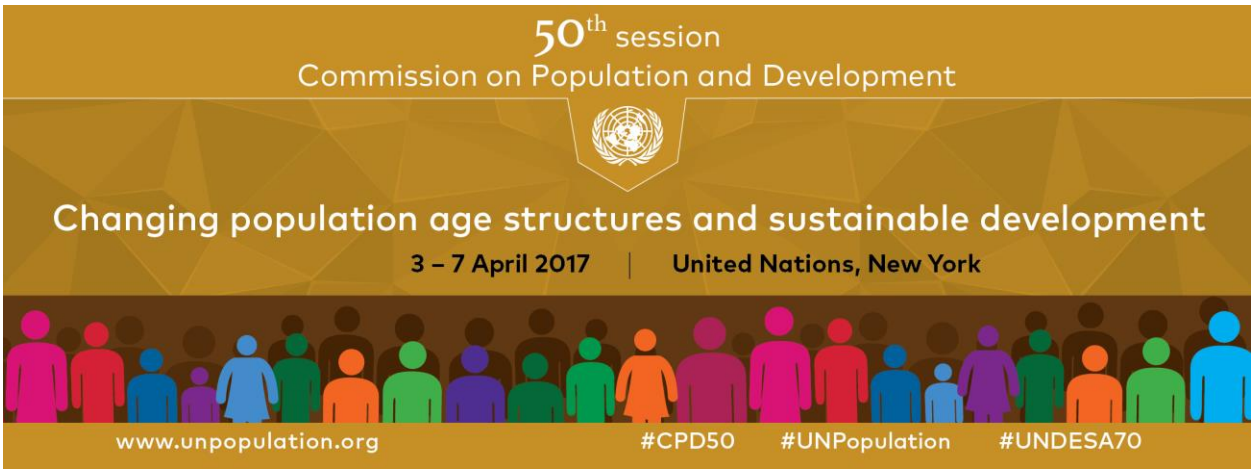


During the 50th session of the Commission, Member States emphasized the importance of strengthening the demographic evidence base for the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In practical terms, upholding the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind" and of "reaching the furthest behind first" will require data disaggregated by individual characteristics, including age and sex, which can be used to locate people in vulnerable situation and to document their circumstances. Therefore, the Commission recommends that the high-level political forum reiterate the commitment to support the collection, dissemination and analysis of demographic data disaggregated by age, sex, and other relevant characteristics. Also, attention for particular age groups that are often not measured, such as 10-14 year-olds and persons aged 65 or over, is of paramount importance.

For more detailed policy recommendations, see also section 6.

6. Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress in poverty eradication

- **Anticipate** demographic trends and their likely impacts on society and actively **plan ahead**, in particular regarding long-term shifts in the population distribution by age, keeping in mind that children and older persons are vulnerable by virtue of their age;
- **Empower** women and girls and **promote** gender equality, as both are essential for leaving no one behind;
- **Invest** in quality health care, education and employment opportunities for all, in order to reap the potential benefits of the demographic dividend, which is time-bound, is not automatic and requires these enabling conditions;
- **Support** life-long learning and employment for all, including for older persons, as well as family-friendly policies that can complement fiscal policies for the sustainability of social security systems;
- **Expand** investments in health and education for children and youth, and throughout the life course, as such investments would improve both personal well-being and lifetime labour force productivity;
- **Consider** increases in the statutory age of retirement in response to increasing longevity and other reforms to ensure the economic security of future generations of older persons;
- **Adopt** laws and policies to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the



International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences;

- **Consider** policies to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration for the benefit of all and to promote and protect the human rights of all migrants;
- **Build** the evidence base to document changes in population age structures and to evaluate the impacts of those changes, in order to monitor the further implementation of the Programme of Action and the achievement of the SDGs; **collect** data disaggregated by individual characteristics, including age and sex, which can be used to document the situation of vulnerable groups;
- **Invest** in data collection, analysis and use to inform national development planning, which should be fact-based, forward-looking and involve all relevant stakeholders;
- **Continue** to build cooperation and partnerships to share ideas, to learn from each other, to collaborate on projects of common interest and to plan for the future.

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