

IPC2025 Closing Ceremony: “Looking Ahead”, by Incoming IUSSP President for 2026-2029 Laura Rodriguez Wong

Distinguished colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to stand here as the incoming president with the mission of—apart from being brief—“Looking Ahead.”

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the members of the Council and especially to President Shireen Jejeebhoy and Secretary General and Treasurer Nico van Nimwegen, whose time and dedication have been essential to the Union.

Nico, thank you for your steadfast commitment and for tackling every task with a smile and good humor. You led both the implementation of the Institutional Affiliation initiative and the Early Career Award with remarkable energy and focus. Your involvement has been invaluable – thank you.

Shireen, I first came to know your work through your pioneering use of DHS data and the then-challenging “Calendar” dataset, which records reproductive events over the five years prior to the survey on a monthly basis! Your leadership of the Union, while balancing your responsibilities at the International Institute of Population Sciences in Mumbai, has been extraordinary. Your calm guidance and ability to listen have been essential over the past four years, and I am truly grateful for what I have learned from you.

I extend my thanks as well to all other members of the Council and especially to Mary Ellen Zuppan, IUSSP’s Executive Director, whose unwavering dedication and behind-the-scenes leadership have been instrumental. Thanks also to Paul Monet and to Joao Cartry Soune-Seyne, who, despite being a newcomer, has shown great enthusiasm.

With gratitude expressed, I would now like to briefly reflect on nearly 100 years of IUSSP history, the challenges we have overcome, and the strategies we need to pursue as a scientific association.

Reaching a century of existence is rare for an institution, particularly in today’s world, and it is a cause for celebration. You can see on the screen the names of IUSSP presidents since its founding. The most significant transformation occurred in 1947, when the Union became an association of individuals. This ensured scientific independence and reduced political interference in demographic research, laying the foundation for today’s vibrant global network.

Looking at these past leaders, I am reminded that the Union’s strength lies not only in its presidents but also in the dedicated Councils who supported them. While diversity has improved over time, it remains a work in progress. Encouragingly, today the gender balance is nearly equal among our 2,000 members, and 60% are based in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Inclusion has always been a priority for past presidents, and it will remain central to my commitment as well.

The Union’s achievements can be seen in this week’s conference, which represents the culmination of years of activities. Between International Population Conferences, IUSSP remains active with seminars, webinars, and capacity-building initiatives, much of this through our Scientific Panels. These panels exist thanks to the voluntary dedication of members, who propose topics, organize events, and drive our intellectual agenda.

All of this underscores the central role of our members. The Union is, above all, a community of individuals whose contributions make our work possible.

Of course, we face important challenges. As past presidents Tom Legrand, Anastasia Gage, and Shireen Jejeebhoy have noted, the obstacles to our work are evolving. Today, IUSSP must remain viable in a turbulent world, where:

- Science is under scrutiny and vital data sources face political pressures. The suspension of DHS, disruptions in the 2020 census round, and ideological interference in Latin America are just some examples. It is estimated that one in three Africans remains uncoun-
ted. At

times it feels as though precious data have been “kidnapped.” Scientists must respond, and this will be among the Council’s priorities.

- Financial support from governments is shrinking, and the donor environment is shifting. Associations like ours are not always a priority.
- Membership has shown a persistent downward trend.

What can we do? I share the approach of recent presidents:

- If you are not yet a member, join IUSSP and benefit from the opportunities it offers.
- Promote teamwork by encouraging your national population association or research center to sponsor an IUSSP seminar or workshop. Capacity-building strengthens us all.
- Consider proposing a new Scientific Panel to address emerging challenges.

In addition to membership, institutional affiliation can strengthen population science through multidisciplinary and the building of stronger networks across research centers worldwide.

Turning to the broader context, population issues are now firmly in the public domain. When I began my career, few people even knew what demography was. Today, thanks to research, outreach, and rapid demographic change, demography has become widely recognized—sometimes even to the point of generating “demographic anxiety.” Narratives about “demographic winter” and “population problems” abound, amplified by social media.

I prefer to speak of “population challenges,” not “problems.” Human beings are not the problem—the mother of six, the childless couple, none of us are “the problem.” Rather, society faces demographic challenges, and it is our duty—and privilege—to provide the evidence needed to address them. Without proper demographic knowledge, changing population trends can be misinterpreted as the consequence of successful programmatic interventions. This is the case, for example, with the celebrated recent increase in births in Korea. It's worth asking how much of this increase is simply a consequence of Korea's still unstable age structure, which favours the occurrence of these events, rather than an actual increase in the fertility rate. As demographers, part of our responsibility is to communicate our findings in clear, accessible language to policymakers, journalists, and the public.

Looking ahead, I highlight a few pressing issues for the Union and the global demographic community:

- Declining fertility across many contexts, and the linked threats to sexual and reproductive health and rights, youth populations, and gender equity.
- Climate change and its demographic consequences, from migration flows to health impacts.
- Political instability, armed conflict, and forced displacement, with profound demographic effects, as we see in Ukraine, Venezuela, Haiti, Gaza, Sudan, and South Sudan.
- The socio-economic and health demands of the elderly, alongside demographic dividends in many developing societies.
- New patterns of family and kinship related to previously mentioned issues.
- The need to safeguard traditional data sources while also engaging with big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence.

I close with the words of J. Bourgeois-Pichat, written in the 1980s but still relevant today as a way of illustrating that Demography is –most of the time– a matter of common sense:

“Anyone who had forecast a hundred years ago the extraordinary demographic changes we are experiencing now, would more appropriately have used imagination rather than extrapolation of the trends at that time.”

Thank you.