

Paris, 30 October 2023

To the IUSSP Council

Re: IUSSP Laureate nomination of France Meslé

We would like to nominate France Meslé as a candidate for the IUSSP Laureate Award for demonstrating excellence in the field of population studies and for her commitment to the discipline. Brilliant researcher, author of an abundant and innovative scientific work, France Meslé has also contributed to the greater good, for the benefit of the field of demography and for the advancement of the international scientific community, and to extensive training and mentoring of new cohorts of researchers in the population sciences.

France Meslé obtained her Doctorate in Medical Studies at the *Université Paris VI* in 1980 but, fascinated by the role of social factors in determining individual health, she immediately applied to the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) for a research position. She soon realized that she had found her calling and fulfilled her appetite for additional training by signing up at the *Institut de démographie de Paris* where she was awarded a Master's degree in demography in 1982, thereby becoming part of a long lineage of physicians who have had a demonstrated interest in the social sciences. Like Louis René Villermé or Jacques Bertillon early on, or like Maurice Aubenque, Jean Sutter, and Jean-Noël Biraben more recently, she has added her stone to the building of an essential bridge between medical science and demographic phenomenon, with a keen eye to the larger social, political, and environmental context of mortality and life expectancy trends and differentials.

Until her hiring at the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), investigations on mortality change and human longevity hardly ever relied on an analysis of medical causes of death, an area rarely touched upon by demographers, as witnessed by the topics covered by international conferences at the time. In fact, her hiring by INED was specifically engineered to fill a gap that had been identified by front-runners like Jean-Noël Biraben, Jacques Vallin, or Alfred Nizard, to whom we owe her recruitment.

France Meslé's entire career centered on the need for a better appreciation of the drivers of the secular increase in life expectancy and changes in the structure of mortality, but also for an understanding of the major setbacks in health progress here and there over the past century. Vital statistics systems in high-income countries have included information on causes of death from the end of the 19th century and such statistics were occasionally collected from an even earlier period. During the last century, these have been processed according to rules developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and causes of death have been routinely coded to the WHO standard codes of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). However, the high degree of technicality of the information available (ICD codes) together with periodic changes in the classification which severely disrupt the time series of cause-specific mortality rates, discouraged most attempts at making sense of these data to better understand trends and differentials in mortality. For more than a century, the statistics produced since the middle of the 19th century awaited the reading key that would finally make them intelligible and meaningful. Together with Jacques Vallin, France Meslé has played an instrumental role in developing an original method to reconstruct homogeneous series of cause-specific mortality indicators in a comparative manner, which proved to be extremely potent for the understanding of the longevity revolution of the 20th century.

First applied to France to reconstruct its health history since 1925, the method notably made it possible to take the full measure of the "cardiovascular revolution" of the 1970s in the unexpected resumption of increases in life expectancy, far beyond what the control of infectious diseases allowed. It was then applied to Communist countries in Central Europe and the former USSR, confirming that the reversal of trends of the mid-1960s resulted from these countries' specific inability to latch on to the cardiovascular revolution but also to stop the rise of social ills (alcoholism, accidents, and other violent deaths in particular). These results directly questioned Abdel Omran's classic theory of the "epidemiological transition", whose promise of a continuous and universal progress in the length of life enabled by advances in medical science was clearly contradicted by the facts, whether the long-term health crisis in Eastern European countries or the unforeseen ravages of the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa.

This theory had the dual flaws of focusing mainly on medical progress without taking into account the economic, social and political contexts which characterize each era and each population, and of postulating that scientific progress automatically reinforces hope to see countries with the lowest life expectancies catching up to their more advanced peers. The theory of "divergence-convergence" cycles, of which France Meslé was one of the main designers, shows on the contrary that any health innovation (medical or otherwise) first leads to a divergence between the countries (or human groups) best prepared to take advantage of it (thus, most often, those characterized by higher levels of education and wealth) and others. It is only in a second step, after they have acquired the necessary means and infrastructure, that the latter can catch up to the pioneers, unless in the meantime a new innovation triggers a new process of divergence... thus explaining the extreme diversity in the levels of human longevity across and within the world populations.

An outstanding researcher, France Meslé has never locked herself in her ivory tower. On the contrary, she has always demonstrated a strong collective commitment, whether at INED or outside, in France or elsewhere. She has consistently accepted her share of responsibilities in the small but difficult world of scientific research, for instance as an active member of the INED labor union, as a committed member of INED administrative organs, and of course through her activities at the IUSSP. Through this, but also through the wisdom widely recognized by her peers, she has been repeatedly elected and re-elected to the INED's Researchers Evaluation Commission (the *commission d'évaluation*), the Scientific Council, and the Board of Directors, thus helping to shape the field of demography in France. Elected or appointed, she has further served on a number of hiring committees, whether for researchers or the administrative and technical staff. Never one to shy away from getting involved in labor unions, she worked hard at the end of the 1980s to make sure that INED achieved the legal recognition it deserved as a scientific research establishment rather than as a simple advisory board to the government on population policy. She also played an active role in the various restructuration of INED, particularly when, at the end of the 1990s, the institution found its very existence seriously threatened. Finally, from 2003 to 2007, she directed one of the largest research groups at INED, the "Mortality, Health, and Epidemiology" team.

Outside of INED too, the skills of France Meslé have been put to good use, notably as a member of a number of expert groups in France, such as one dedicated to the study of alcoholism (the *Haut Comité d'étude et d'information sur l'alcoolisme*), another devoted to monitoring and preventing ill-treatment and abuse of children (the *Observatoire national de l'enfance en danger*), or yet another to promote the development and ethic processing of

cancer registries. On the international stage, she has participated to an equally large number of expert groups in a variety of organizations, like the Council of Europe, the United States prestigious National Academies, or at an even higher level, the United Nations Population Division. She has also taken an active part in leading international professional organizations, notably the European Association of Population Studies, the Population Association of America, and, last but not least, the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, on whose behalf she led scientific committees or organized special sessions for the general conferences and where she served first as the Secretary General (from 2014 to 2017) and then as a Council Member (from 2018 to 2021).

France Meslé is also a great communicator, a skill that served her well for her prolific editing and publication work, with a long list of articles in some of the top demography journals and other scientific medias, as well as a number of books and encyclopedia articles. She has been the chief editor of both written media (like the *European Journal of Population*) and digital media (the INED website, which she contributed to create in 1997). She was asked to participate in the evaluation of the journal *Demographic Research* in 2007, which has since become one of the most highly rated journals in the field of population studies. Since 1999, she has been a member of the editorial board of the INED publication dedicated to popularize the institute's research findings, *Population and Societies*. She has also extensively contributed to more specialized publications to educate non-demographers to the main issues in the field, for instance as the author of multiple chapters in the *Treaties of Demography*, a monumental sum of demographic knowledge, as well as in the *Encyclopédie des Sciences Sociales*, and one of the main editors of a *Dictionnaire de démographie* which involved coordinating and supervising the efforts of hundreds of researchers across a variety of scientific fields.

Her communication skills and her ability to translate complicated concepts in simple language also made her a remarkable teacher and her kindness and generosity further led her to become a much appreciated mentor, as attested by several of this letter's signatories. An excellent teacher, she has taught, with a continuous passion and strength of conviction, at all levels where demographic knowledge and methods can be taught, whether to train social workers (at the *Institut régional des travailleurs sociaux de Melun*), public health executives (at the *École nationale de santé publique de Rennes*, the school of public health ranked first in the country) or forensic doctors (at the *Institut médico-légal de Paris*), but also and above all, of course, students in population studies, at the Master's and PhD levels (at *Science-Po Paris*, at the *Institut de démographie* of the University Paris I, as well as Paris IV and Bordeaux IV). From its inception, she has also joined repeatedly the faculty of the more recent *European Doctoral School of Demography* and the *Paris School of Economics*. Her academic career is directly fed by her strong research activity, not only through the official or unofficial supervision of doctorate dissertations but also as a mentor to many young researchers from a variety of geographic origins and cultural backgrounds that she has repeatedly encouraged to join the team she contributed to assemble. She was helped in this respect by her talent to develop comprehensive and international projects for which she was able to obtain extensive funding from national or international organizations.

Her work has absolutely led to an improved understanding of trends and differentials in human longevity, providing the necessary tools to public health practitioners and governing authorities to design more effective programs and interventions. She dedicated her career to an extremely rigorous effort to collect, process, analyze and interpret cause-of-death statistics in a comparative perspective and to build bridges with a range of other scientific fields

(medicine, public health, and epidemiology especially, but without any hesitation to cross disciplinary boundaries when pursuing her quest for identifying the driving forces behind the patterns uncovered by her research) while contributing tirelessly to the transmission of technical or substantive knowledge, all essential drivers of this exemplary scientific journey.

Magali Barbieri and Jacques Vallin

This nomination is supported by (in alphabetical order):

- Graziella Caselli (Italy)
- Vladimir Canudas-Romo (Mexico)
- Maria Eugenia Cosio Zavala (Mexico)
- Viviana Egidi (Italy)
- Anastasia Gage (United States)
- Jenny Garcia (Venezuela)
- Pavel Grigoriev (Belarus)
- Reiko Hayashi (Japan)
- Juris Kruminis (Latvia)
- Thérèse Locoh (France)
- Vladimir Shkolnikov (Russia)
- John Wilmoth (United States)