

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

COMMISSION ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT
Forty-ninth Session

Report of the Secretary-General on world demographic trends (E/CN.9/2016/6)

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New York, 15 April 2016

Madam Chairperson, distinguished Delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to introduce the report of the Secretary-General entitled “World demographic trends” (E/CN.9/2016/6), which provides an overview of demographic trends for the world, its major geographic areas and for selected countries and development groups. It focuses on the changes that have occurred in recent decades and the projected changes that are projected to take place during the time frame for achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, offering guidance to planners and policymakers in the area of population and development. The topics covered by the report include population size and growth, fertility and family planning, mortality, international migration, urbanization, and changing population age structures, particularly population ageing.

Since the 1970s, the global population has grown by about 1 billion people approximately every 12 years. It reached 5 billion in 1987, 6 billion in 1998 and 7 billion in 2011. This unprecedented growth came about despite significant reductions in fertility. The global population now stands at about 7.4 billion. Currently, the world’s population continues to grow though more slowly than in the recent past and increments to the population will start decreasing during the timeline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

According to the medium variant, the population is projected to reach 8.5 billion in 2030,

and to increase further to 9.7 billion in 2050 and to 11.2 billion by 2100. While there is a fair degree of uncertainty in the long-term projections, as illustrated by the 80 and 95 per cent prediction intervals in the figure, the world's population is virtually certain to continue growing over the next few decades.

The regional dimensions of population growth have important implications for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Of the current 7.4 billion people in the world, 4.4 billion now live in Asia and 1.2 billion in Africa. Projected growth of the world's population will be spread unevenly across major areas. Between 2015 and 2030, Africa and Asia will each gain about half a billion inhabitants. In Africa, this will represent a 42 per cent increase in population, while for most other regions the increases are expected to range between 11 and 20 per cent. Europe's population is projected to stay about the same or even slightly decline by 2030.

The world's level of total fertility has fallen from an average of 4.5 children per woman in the early 1970s to 2.5 children per woman in recent years; it is projected to reach 2.4 children per woman by 2030. In the early 1970s, fertility was above four children per woman in most countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania. At that time, 70 per cent of the world's population lived in countries where women had four or more children on average; today, about 14 per cent of the world's population do so. Of the 48 countries where fertility averaged four or more children in recent years, 40 were in sub-Saharan Africa, and most belonged to the group of least developed countries. Because of persistently high levels of fertility, these countries have a young age structure, and their populations are growing rapidly.

Madam Chairperson,

One of the objectives of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development is the stabilization of world population, a stabilization that would contribute to attain sustainable development and maintain economic growth. Many

Governments including most from countries where fertility remains above four children per woman regard their fertility level as being too high and have policies aimed at lowering it.

The increasing availability of family planning services has enabled a growing number of women and men to decide about the number and spacing of their children. In 2015, more than 90 per cent of Governments provided direct or indirect support for family planning. Worldwide, current contraceptive use among married or in-union women aged 15 to 49 increased from 55 per cent in 1990 to 64 per cent in 2015. The marked rise in the level of contraceptive use between 1990 and 2015 was not accompanied by an equal decline in the unmet need for family planning. An estimated 12 per cent of married or in-union women had an unmet need for family planning in 2015. Among regions of the world, unmet need is highest in Eastern, Middle and Western Africa and in Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Governments have agreed in the SDG targets to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, by 2030. The estimates for 2015 indicate the need for an accelerated investment in the provision of voluntary and high-quality family planning information, counselling and services.

The report documents major progress in the reduction of mortality. Sustained mortality declines began in the late nineteenth century in the more developed regions, but they accelerated and spread globally following the Second World War. Although life expectancy has risen nearly everywhere since the 1970s, progress lagged in Africa during the 1980s and 1990s, and life expectancy declined in the countries most affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, reversing some gains of the past. More recently, with the expanded availability of antiretroviral treatment, HIV/AIDS-related mortality appears to have passed a peak in most of those countries, and African life expectancy rose by about 6 years between 2000-2005 and 2010-2015.

Globally, life expectancy at birth reached 70 years in 2010-2015 and is projected to rise to 74 years by 2025-2030. Overall, there has been substantial progress in lowering child and maternal mortality and in combatting the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but efforts will need to be sustained and strengthened to meet the SDG targets in these areas and others pertaining to mortality and health.

Madam Chairperson,

The world is going through a long-term transformation toward an older population age structure. Countries began this process at different times and are proceeding through it at varying speeds, depending mainly on the timing and pace of the decline in fertility. In the decades after the start of a sustained fertility decline, the relative proportions of working-age adults and older persons both rise as the proportion of children declines. The period of rising proportions in the working ages has been called a “demographic window of opportunity” or “demographic dividend”. Provided that the economy generates sufficient jobs for the growing number of workers, an increasing ratio of workers to dependents provides a boost to income per capita and can potentially free up resources for investment that will foster sustainable development and lead to higher living standards over the long term.

In all areas of the world, persons of working age (ages 15-64) made up a higher proportion of the population in 2015 than in 1970. Many countries, including a growing number in Africa, will experience further increases in that proportion between 2015 and 2030, while others have already reached the peak proportion or will do so between 2015 and 2030. In the upcoming decades, a large majority of countries in Asia, Oceania, and Latin America and the Caribbean will be in stages of the demographic transition that are favourable for realizing the benefits of rising or still-high proportions in the working ages. Most countries in Africa during this period will still be in the early stages of this process, whereas the majority of high-income countries are already in the more advanced stages characterized by population ageing. Investments in health, education and employment opportunities for young people are key measures to maximize the economic benefits of changing dependency ratios.

Distinguished delegates,

In 2015, there were 244 million international migrants worldwide, making up 3.3 per cent of the global population. Generally speaking, international migrants tend to include a larger proportion of working-age persons than the overall population. Although international migration will not halt the long-term trend toward population ageing, net positive levels of migration can slow the increase in old-age dependency ratios. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the positive contributions of migrants to the development of societies of origin and destination. It includes targets to promote safe, orderly and regular migration, to fight human trafficking, and to facilitate the transfer of remittances.

Madam Chairperson,

The demographic changes described in the report have been occurring and will continue to do so in a world where a growing proportion of humanity is concentrated in urban settlements. It is projected that by 2030 virtually all of the world's population growth will actually take place in cities. Accordingly, the share of the world's population living in urban areas is projected to increase from 54 per cent in 2015 to 60 per cent in 2030. While Africa and Asia remained mostly rural in 2015, with 40 per cent and 48 per cent of their respective populations living in urban areas, these regions are currently urbanizing faster than the rest of the world and this should continue for the coming years.

The number of large cities has been growing rapidly, and they house an increasing proportion of urban dwellers. Urbanization has generally been a positive force for economic development and poverty reduction. However, rapid and unplanned urban growth threatens sustainable development when the necessary infrastructure is not developed, or when urban growth leads to the expansion of slums, urban sprawl, pollution and environmental degradation. Government policies for planning and managing urban growth can help ensure that the benefits are shared equitably and sustainably.

Madam Chairperson,

Anticipated demographic changes in coming years must be accounted for when planning the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Overall, there is great diversity in recent population trends and their expected future trajectory across countries and major geographic areas. Countries will be implementing the 2030 Agenda from very different starting points regarding levels of fertility, mortality and urbanization. While some countries will experience a decline in population size by 2030, in others the population will increase by over 50 per cent. A notable difficulty for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda is that much of the population growth between today and 2030 will be concentrated in countries facing the largest challenges in ending poverty and hunger and ensuring health, education and equality for all.

Thank you, Madam Chairperson.