



Changing population age structures and sustainable development

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Changes in the age structure of human populations are taking place across the globe, with major implications for sustainable development. A [report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations](#), prepared for the 50th session of the Commission on Population and Development in April 2017, includes the following findings and recommendations.

Ten key findings and recommendations

- 1. Although the transition toward longer lives and smaller families is universal, its speed and timing vary greatly across countries and regions.**

The proportion of children (ages 0-14) and youth (ages 15-24) in the world is slowly declining, while that of older persons (ages 65+) is rising. While Europe is currently the oldest region and Africa the youngest, all countries are undergoing a similar demographic transition leading, eventually, to an age distribution that is much older than in the past.

- 2. In much of Africa and parts of Asia, numbers of children and youth are rising rapidly.**

Policies to support further improvements in maternal and child care and to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services are critical to achieve further reductions in maternal and child mortality. Typically, such policies lead also to a reduction in the birth rate.

- 3. In countries where growth in the number of children and youth has slowed recently, there is an historic opportunity for more rapid economic growth.**

With a sustained reduction in the birth rate, the working-age population (ages 25-64) may continue to grow for a few more decades, temporarily raising the ratio of workers to dependents. This relative increase in the working-age population is conducive to rapid growth in income per capita. Achieving the full benefit of this “first demographic dividend” requires investment in human capital – ensuring access to health care and education at all ages – and opportunities for productive employment.

- 4. Although the world’s working-age population is likely to increase more than 30% by 2050, it will remain stable as a fraction of the global population.**

Most of the growth in the working-age population worldwide will occur in Africa and Asia. At the other extreme, the size of Europe’s working-age population has recently started to decline.

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- 5. Population ageing raises the fiscal pressure on pension and health care programmes.**
Governments should anticipate demographic trends and their likely fiscal impacts on public support systems for older persons. They should consider increasing the statutory age of retirement in response to increasing life expectancy, along with other reforms to ensure both the adequacy and the sustainability of social security systems.
- 6. Young and middle-aged persons, especially women, face challenges in balancing the demands of work and family, including for the care of children and older parents.**
Governments should adopt policies to support the participation of women in the labour force, parental leave for both fathers and mothers, affordable child care, and long-term care for older persons, when needed. Such policies can ease downward pressures on the birth rate while contributing to gender equality and women's empowerment.
- 7. Population ageing can be accompanied by robust economic growth.**
Larger cohorts of older persons and increased savings per capita in reaction to longer lifespans can enhance investment and stimulate economic growth. To benefit fully from this "second demographic dividend", countries should invest also in education and health, ensure opportunities for productive employment, and encourage savings and investment.
- 8. The growing population of older persons can benefit from investments in health and education over the life course, and from having options for long-term care.**
Because of population ageing, the number of persons requiring extended care due to disability or functional limitation is likely to increase in all countries. National health systems should promote healthy lifestyles and provide quality care throughout the life course. Governments and other stakeholders should support family caregivers while also providing options for community-based and institutional care when needed.
- 9. International migration can attenuate the impact of population ageing.**
Migrants tend to be younger on average than the population of the host country. Although it may slow the increase of the average age, migration cannot halt or reverse the gradual process of population ageing. Countries should consider adopting policies to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration.
- 10. Age-disaggregated data are essential for tracking changes and designing policies.**
Demographic data disaggregated by age, sex, and other relevant characteristics are essential to document changes in the age distribution of a population and to understand their consequences. Such data are critical also for designing appropriate policies and for assessing progress toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially those pertaining to particular age groups, such as children, youth and older persons.



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