

**COMMISSION ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT  
FIFTIETH SESSION**

**CHANGING POPULATION AGE STRUCTURES AND SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT**

**REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL (E/CN.9/2017/2)**

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**Madame Chairperson,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and gentleman,**

It is my pleasure to introduce the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Changing population age structures and sustainable development” (E/CN.9/2017/2).

This report gives an overview of the changes in the population age structures in the world, highlighting key drivers and implications for sustainable development, including reference to recent evidence on the relationship between fertility decline, health and education, intergenerational and gender issues associated with balancing work and family obligations. It also highlights some of the aggregate consequences, at the scale of the total population and the macro-economy.

The report ends with a set of policy recommendations, some pertaining more specifically to countries with high fertility and youthful populations, and others to countries with low fertility, high life expectancy and older populations.

The world population has continued to make important strides in its demographic transition from high levels of fertility and mortality, to low levels of fertility and

mortality. This transition has direct implications on the population age structure, as illustrated in the [figure in the slide](#), that shows the progressive reduction in the proportion of children and youth, as well as the still relatively modest but rapidly expanding share of older persons in the population, from 1980 to the present and through the year 2050.

One of the main differences between the period before 2015 and the period after that year is that before 2015, the reduction in the share of children (ages 0-14) and youth (ages 15-24) was translated almost entirely into the rising share of the working-age population (ages 25-64). After 2015, the projections suggest that the working-age population will likely stabilize at just under one half of the total world population, and that all of the continued decline of the share of children and youth will be compensated by faster increases in the share of older persons (ages 65 or over).

The next [figure](#) shows that there is much regional diversity in the levels and trends just discussed. On the one hand, Africa, still at the early stages of the demographic transition, has large proportions of children and youth, which combined, represent about 60 per cent of the total African population in 2015. Europe is at the other extreme, at an advanced stage of the demographic transition, with people aged 65 years or over representing 18 per cent of the European population in 2015. Northern America and Oceania trail not too far behind. Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean are in intermediate stages of the transition, and experiencing rapid population ageing, with the proportion of older persons projected to more than double in these two regions by 2050.

### **Ladies and gentlemen,**

The continued global increase in the number of **children and youth** is due mainly to growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, and to smaller positive contributions by Northern America and Oceania. During the 2015-2050 period, children and youth will see their numbers *decline* in Asia, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean.

The global **working-age population** is projected to grow from 3.6 billion in 2015 to 4.8 billion in 2050, with most of that increase contributed by Africa and Asia. Because migrants tend to be concentrated in the young working ages, countries with large net inflows of migrants can attenuate, although not neutralize the broad trend toward population ageing. If international migration to developed countries were to stop, the old-age dependency ratio in these countries would be 4 per cent higher in 2050 compared to the scenario where migration flows continue at current levels.

**The population of older persons** is growing faster than any other younger age group. Older people in the world are expected to increase more than 2 and a half times, from 608 million in 2015 to 1.6 billion by 2050. The growth of the older population will be particularly fast in Asia, in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Africa, where the number of older persons is expected to triple by 2050.

Different indicators of the changes in the age structure, such as the proportion of the population aged 65 or over, the median age, or the old-age dependency ratio yield broadly similar trends in ageing. **Alternative measures**, however, that emphasize the remaining life expectancy (rather than the years already lived) reveal a much slower pace of ageing. Measures of this sort, that take into account *improvements over time* in cognitive ability, overall health status and potential productivity over the range of adult ages, suggest that population ageing need not have as dire socio-economic consequences as is often assumed.

Another important feature of the older population is a clear **female predominance** in this age group. In 2015, women accounted for 55 per cent of the global population aged 65 or over, and for 61 per cent of those aged 80 years or over. The percentages were highest in Europe, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern America and Africa, and Asia and Oceania. As the report notes in later sections, this has important implications for intergenerational support, pensions and social protection more generally.

**The linkages between health, education and fertility** are at the core of the demographic transition. Improvements in health and reductions in infant and child mortality have typically preceded sustained declines in fertility, which is the main driver of changes in the population age structures. The [figure](#) in the next slide shows recent evidence from selected developing countries, that confirm the well-established negative association between education and fertility. But the figure also shows significant diversity. Notice for example the wide gaps in levels of fertility by level of education in Kenya, Ghana and Ethiopia, in contrast to the declining and smaller differentials in Nepal, and smaller still in Indonesia and Bangladesh.

Recent evidence presented in the next [figure](#), drawn from data of the National Transfer Accounts project, suggests that lower fertility is in turn associated with higher spending in human capital (health and education) per person, a key enabling element of the **demographic dividend**, to be discussed shortly.

As the demographic transition unfolds, women typically have fewer children, and do so later in life, while often increasing their labour force participation. This brings about many positive changes, but leads in some cases to a “sandwich generation” of mostly women taking up the care for children and elderly parents, while also being more active in the workforce.

The report shows increasing evidence of the large contribution of women to market and non-market production, including women’s contribution of 87% of all household production and 58% of total aggregate work in Senegal; household production, mostly done by women, estimated at 22% of GDP in Mexico; and increased household work of women in Brazil after marrying and having children. In this regard, policies to support women’s labour force participation, including parental leave for both fathers and mothers, as well as affordable child care as well as long-term care for older people, can help to **reduce gender inequalities** and ease the fiscal pressures of population ageing.

**Madame Chairperson,**

The last chapter of the present Secretary-General's report reviews some key **aggregate, population and macroeconomic** implications of the demographic transition. First, the report notes that the world is coming to the end of the era of growing labour supply. This is due to the reduction of total labour force participation rates, including in major economies of the world such as China, India, Japan and the United States, and the stabilization and the start of the decline of the share of working-age population in the world total.

Second, the continued ageing of the world's population calls for increased attention to the needs and contributions of older persons to society. The achievement of the 2030 Agenda goal of social protection for all, will require policies to ensure equitable and sustainable pension and health care systems, and to allow for different options for long-term care, including support for family caregivers, and institutional care for the severely disabled.

Regarding the macroeconomic implications, the report shows that countries in Africa, and some in Asia and Latin American and the Caribbean in the early to intermediate stages of the demographic transition, will see **increasing economic support ratios**, namely a "first demographic dividend", through 2050. Other countries, such as China, Germany, Italy, the Republic of Korea, Spain, Slovenia and Thailand, will see their support ratios fall, by 0.5 per cent or more per year over 2015-2050.

But a "second demographic dividend", supported by increased investment in human and physical capital associated to lower fertility and increased longevity, can remain positive long after the first dividend has elapsed. The largest demographic dividends (annual increases in economic growth) have taken place in Asia (2.3% per year), owing to the region's rapid demographic transition and major investments in education. In other regions, the estimated peak dividends range from 1.5% to 1.8% per year.

Africa's demographic transition is projected to be slower than other developing regions, but it could end up reaping the largest total (long-term) demographic dividend. The

realization of this potential, however, is conditional on improved access to sexual and reproductive health care services, investment in human and physical capital, and productive employment available during the dividend period. This would be consistent with the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in developing countries, but it is not a foregone result.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

In conclusion, let me mention some of the main recommendations contained in the report:

In countries where the number of children and youth are rising rapidly, priority should be given to policies to support improvements in maternal and child care, and to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, which also typically lead to a reduction in fertility;

Countries where fertility decline is already underway and the share of the working-age population continues to grow have a historic opportunity to benefit from the demographic dividend, which can be further enhanced by investment in human capital (health and education at all ages), the availability of productive employment for youth and working age adults, and policies to encourage savings and investment.

Young and middle-aged adults, especially women, face challenges in balancing the demands of work and family, including for the care of children and older parents. Governments should consider policies to support the participation of women in the labour force, parental leave for fathers and mothers, affordable child care, and long-term care for older persons. Such policies would contribute to improve gender equality and women's empowerment, and can yield macroeconomic benefits as well.

As population ageing progresses, Governments should anticipate demographic trends and their fiscal impacts on the support systems for older persons. They should consider increasing the statutory age of retirement in proportion to increasing life expectancy,

along with other reforms to improve the coverage, adequacy and the sustainability of social security systems. Population ageing can lead to improvements in the well-being at all ages through lifelong learning and health prevention and care.

Options for long-term care are required to address the increasing number of older persons requiring extended care due to disability or functional limitation. Governments and other stakeholders should support family caregivers while also providing options for community-based and institutional care.

Demographic data disaggregated by age, sex, and other relevant characteristics are essential to document changing population age structures, to understand their consequences, and to assess progress toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, Governments, with the support of international organizations, should promote the collection, dissemination and analysis of such disaggregated data.

Thank you, Madame Chairperson