

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The General Assembly, in its resolution 54/262 of 25 May 2000, decided to convene the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002, coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of the first World Assembly on Ageing. The Second World Assembly, to be held in Madrid from 8-12 April 2002, is dedicated to the overall review of the outcome of the first World Assembly on Ageing, as well as the adoption of the proposed international strategy for action on ageing. The new strategy seeks to address the sociocultural, economic and demographic realities of the twenty-first century, with particular attention to the needs and perspectives of developing countries.

Issues related to population ageing and older persons have played a prominent role in the three major international population conferences organized by the United Nations during the past quarter century. For example, the International Conference on Population and Development, held in 1994, recognized that the economic and social impact of population ageing is both an opportunity and a challenge to all societies.¹ More recently, the key actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, adopted by the General Assembly at its twenty-first special session on 2 July 1999, reiterated the need, *inter alia*, for all societies to address the significant consequences of population ageing in the coming decades.²

The Population Division of the United Nations has a long tradition of studying population ageing, including estimating and projecting older populations, and examining the determinants and consequences of population ageing. From the groundbreaking report on population ageing in 1956, which focused mainly on population ageing in the more developed countries, to the first United Nations wallchart on population ageing issues published in 1999, the Population Division has consistently sought to bring population ageing to the attention of the international community.³

The present report is intended to provide a solid demographic foundation for the debates and follow-up activities of the Second World Assembly on Ageing. The report considers the process of population ageing for the world as a whole, for more and less developed regions, major areas and regions, and individual countries. Demographic profiles covering the period 1950 to 2050 are provided for each country, highlighting the relevant indicators of population ageing.

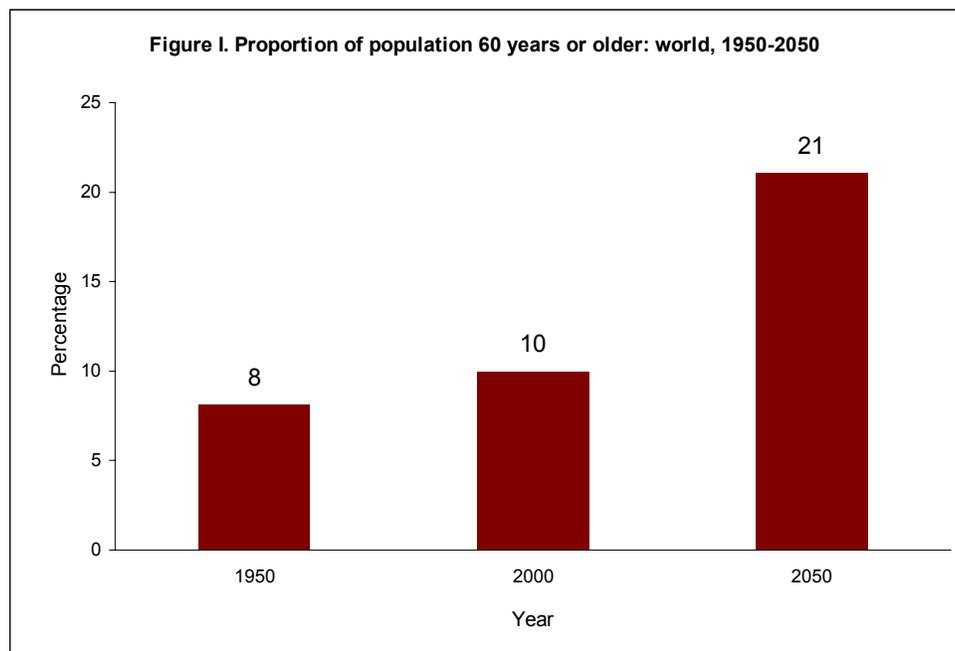
The report presents the following four major findings:

¹*Population and Development*, vol. 1: *Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.95.XIII.7).

²*Review and Appraisal of the Progress Made in Achieving the Goals and Objectives of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, 1999 Report* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.99.XIII.16).

³*The Aging of Populations and its Economic and Social Implications*, Population Studies, No. 26 (United Nations publication, Sales No. 1956. XIII.6); and *Population Ageing 1999* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.99.XIII.11).

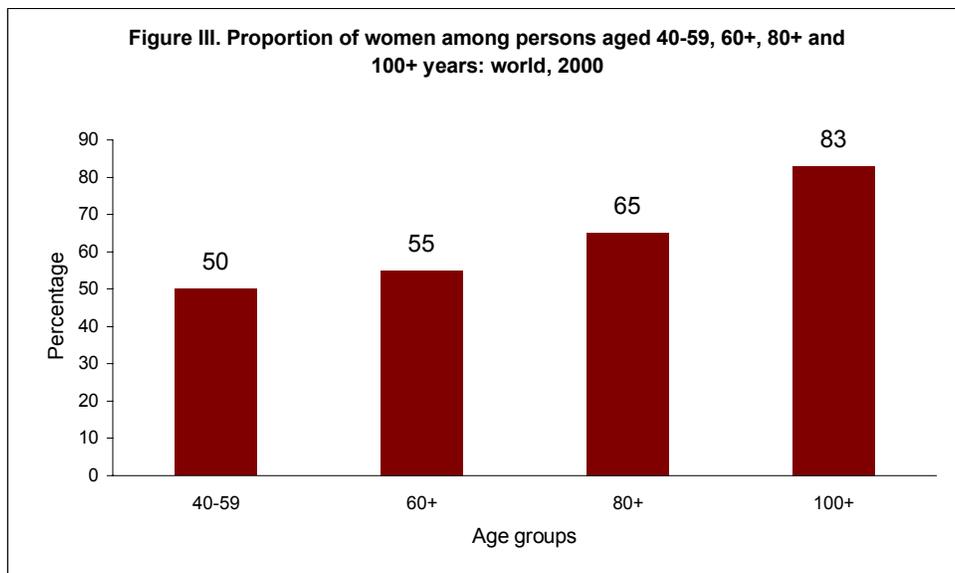
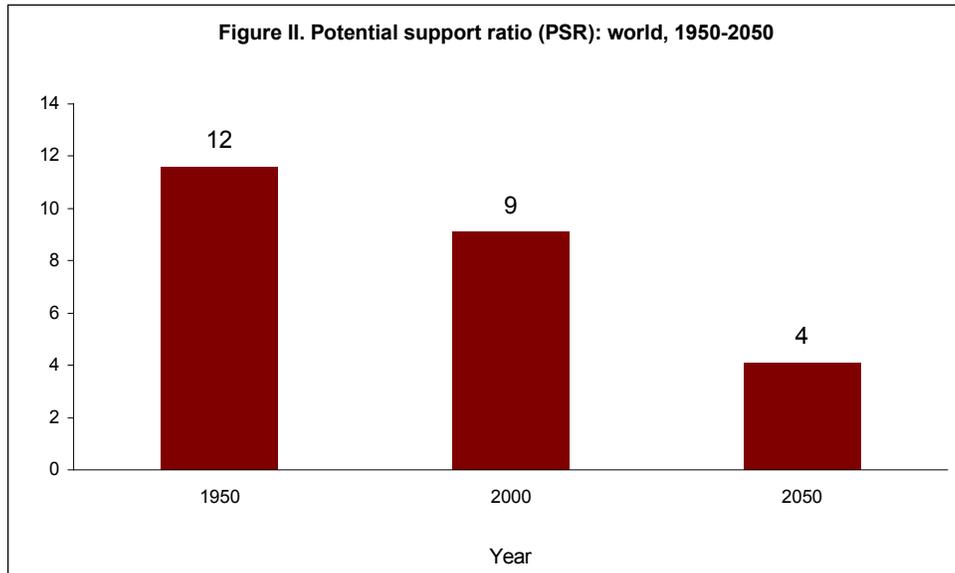
1. Population ageing is unprecedented, without parallel in the history of humanity. Increases in the proportions of older persons (60 years or older) are being accompanied by declines in the proportions of the young (under age 15). By 2050, the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history. Moreover, by 1998 this historic reversal in relative proportions of young and old had already taken place in the more developed regions.
2. Population ageing is pervasive, a global phenomenon affecting every man, woman and child. The steady increase of older age groups in national populations, both in absolute numbers and in relation to the working-age population, has a direct bearing on the intergenerational and intragenerational equity and solidarity that are the foundations of society.
3. Population ageing is profound, having major consequences and implications for all facets of human life. In the economic area, population ageing will have an impact on economic growth, savings, investment and consumption, labour markets, pensions, taxation and intergenerational transfers. In the social sphere, population ageing affects health and health care, family composition and living arrangements, housing and migration. In the political arena, population ageing can influence voting patterns and representation.
4. Population ageing is enduring. During the twentieth century the proportion of older persons continued to rise, and this trend is expected to continue into the twenty-first century. For example, the proportion of older persons was 8 per cent in 1950 and 10 per cent in 2000, and is projected to reach 21 per cent in 2050 (figure I).



Other key findings of this report include the following:

- The trend towards older populations is largely irreversible, with the young populations of the past unlikely to occur again.
- The increase in the older population is the result of the demographic transition from high to low levels of fertility and mortality.
- As the twenty-first century began, the world population included approximately 600 million older persons, triple the number recorded fifty years earlier. By mid-century, there will be some 2 billion older persons—once again, a tripling of this age group in a span of 50 years.
- Globally the population of older persons is growing by 2 per cent each year, considerably faster than the population as a whole. For at least the next twenty-five years, the older population is expected to continue growing more rapidly than other age groups. The growth rate of those 60 or older will reach 2.8 per cent annually in 2025-2030. Such rapid growth will require far-reaching economic and social adjustments in most countries.
- Marked differences exist between regions in the number and proportion of older persons. In the more developed regions, almost one fifth of the population was aged 60 or older in the year 2000; by 2050, this proportion is expected to reach one third. In the less developed regions, only 8 per cent of the population is currently over the age of 60; however, by 2050 older persons will make up nearly 20 per cent of the population.
- As the pace of population ageing is much faster in developing countries than in developed countries, developing countries will have less time to adjust to the consequences of population ageing. Moreover, population ageing in the developing countries is taking place at much lower levels of socio-economic development than was the case in the developed countries.
- Today the median age for the world is 26 years. The country with the youngest population is Yemen, with a median age of 15 years, and the oldest is Japan, with a median age of 41 years. By 2050, the world median age is expected to have increased by ten years, to 36 years. The country with the youngest population at that time is projected to be Niger, with a median age of 20 years, and the oldest is expected to be Spain, with a median age of 55 years.
- The older population is itself ageing. The fastest growing age group in the world is the oldest-old, those aged 80 years or older. They are currently increasing at 3.8 per cent per year and comprise more than one tenth of the total number of older persons. By the middle of the century, one fifth of older persons will be 80 years or older.
- The potential support ratio, or PSR (the number of persons aged 15-64 years per one older person aged 65 years or older), indicates the dependency burden on potential workers. The impact of demographic ageing is visible in the PSR, which has fallen and will continue to fall. Between 1950 and 2000, the PSR fell from 12 to 9 people in the working ages per each person 65 years or older. By mid-century, the PSR is projected to fall to 4 working-age persons for each person 65 years or older (figure II). Potential support ratios have important implications for social security schemes, particularly traditional systems in which current workers pay for the benefits of current retirees.

- The majority of older persons are women, as female life expectancy is higher than that for men. In 2000, there were 63 million more women than men aged 60 or older, and at the oldest ages, there are two to five times as many women as men (figure III).



- The health of older persons typically deteriorates with increasing age, inducing greater demand for long-term care as the numbers of the oldest-old grow. The parent support ratio, the ratio of the population 85 or older to those aged 50 to 64, provides an indication of the support families may need to provide to their oldest members. Globally, there were fewer than 2 persons aged 85 or older for every 100 persons aged

50-64 in 1950. By 2000, the ratio had increased to 4 per 100, and it is projected to reach 11 by 2050.

- Countries with high per capita incomes tend to have lower participation rates of older workers. In the more developed regions, 21 per cent of men aged 60 years or older are economically active as compared to 50 per cent of men in the less developed regions. In the more developed regions, 10 per cent of older women are economically active, compared to 19 per cent in the less developed regions. Older persons participate to a greater extent in labour markets in the less developed regions, largely owing to the limited coverage of retirement schemes and the relatively small incomes when provided.
- Although literacy has been increasing among the older population, illiteracy is still common. In the less developed regions, as of 2000, about half of all persons 60 or older were literate. Only about one third of older women and about three fifths of older men could read and write at a basic level of competence. In the more developed regions, literacy approached universality in all but a few countries.

In conclusion, it is evident that unprecedented demographic changes, which had their origins in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and are continuing well into the twenty-first century, are transforming the world. The declines in fertility reinforced by increasing longevity have produced and will continue to produce unprecedented changes in the structure of all societies, notably the historic reversal in the proportions of young and older persons. The profound, pervasive and enduring consequences of population ageing present enormous opportunities as well as enormous challenges for all societies.