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Population Prospects of Countries in Special Situations

Tracking demographic change among the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States

March 2024 . <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/> . #UNPopulation

The 2030 Agenda makes extensive reference to the least developed countries (LDCs), the landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and the small island developing States (SIDS), recognizing their unique vulnerabilities and the challenges they face for sustainable development. The 110 countries and territories that comprise these three groups exhibit both similarities and differences in their demographic profiles and prospects. Anticipating the nature and consequences of future population change in these countries is essential for building resilience and capitalizing on associated opportunities for a more prosperous tomorrow.

*The following key messages are based on the report **Population Prospects of Countries in Special Situations: Tracking demographic change among the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States**, prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).*

Ten key messages

1. LDCs will account for nearly half of the world's population increase through 2050.

The population of the current LDCs, at 1.3 billion in 2024, is expected to double in size over the next four decades, with the population of African LDCs doubling in roughly three decades. LLDCs, half of which are LDCs, are also experiencing a rapid increase in population size. The pace of growth in these countries magnifies the challenges associated with eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development.

2. The total population of SIDS will grow at a relatively slow pace to around 85 million in 2050.

By 2050, the population in more than half of the SIDS will have stabilized or started to decline. Half of the growth in the total population of SIDS will occur in the Pacific region due to higher fertility levels. The small size of SIDS populations — mostly under 2 million — may limit their resilience in the face of socioeconomic and environmental shocks and stressors.

3. LDCs and LLDCs will continue to have youthful populations for decades to come.

The number of school-age children and others below age 25 in LDCs and LLDCs is projected to increase by 40 per cent between now and 2050. Greater investments in education, health care and other basic services for children and youth are necessary for countries to maximize the benefits of the demographic dividend. Such investments are especially critical for LDCs in Africa, where the number of school-age children and youth is likely to see a 60 per cent increase by 2050.

4. Most SIDS and some Asian LDCs and LLDCs will experience rapid population ageing.

The shares of persons aged 65 years or older will nearly double in many of these countries between today and 2050, reaching 20 per cent of the total population in thirty countries or areas by that date. In LDCs, the number of older persons is projected to double in less than two decades. Investing in social protection and health-care systems, providing opportunities for life-long learning and creating the conditions for decent work are critical for reducing levels of poverty and safeguarding the dignity of older persons.

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5. Different demographic factors will drive population change in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

In LDCs and LLDCs in Africa, high fertility will be the main driver of population growth through 2050. In contrast, most SIDS populations will continue to grow, even where low fertility prevails, due to declining mortality rates and a large proportion of women of childbearing age. Understanding and anticipating these changes can facilitate the formulation of effective and targeted policies.

6. Priorities for investments in health care differ across LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

Whereas child mortality and maternal mortality are still alarmingly high in many LDCs and LLDCs, SIDS deal with a high burden of premature deaths caused by non-communicable diseases. To reduce maternal and early-age mortality, further investments in health-care services for women, newborns and children are needed, including for sexual and reproductive health care to prevent unplanned and high-risk pregnancies. Strengthening primary health-care services and continuing investments in the prevention, early detection and treatment of non-communicable diseases throughout the life course are crucial to reduce premature deaths.

7. Advancing gender equality improves the lives of women and increases opportunities for sustained economic growth.

With the rapid growth in the youth population of LDCs, eliminating gender disparities in educational attainment and boosting gender-equitable paid employment and decent work will improve the lives of millions of women and girls and maximize the potential of the demographic window of opportunity for accelerated economic growth. Improving girls' and women's education also promotes reductions in child marriage, adolescent fertility and maternal mortality. Concerted efforts are needed to improve and expand access to sexual and reproductive health care, including for family planning, and to increase women's ability to make informed decisions about their reproductive health.

8. International migration adds complexity to the demographic realities faced by countries.

More than 72 million migrants from countries in special situations were living abroad in 2020. In nearly one third of SIDS, the diaspora exceeded 30 per cent of the population at origin, underscoring the significant role that international migration plays in both population dynamics and the social and economic development of these states. Policies that encourage diaspora engagement, skills transfer and recognition, productive investment of remittances, skills retention and return can help promote a more sustainable future, especially when migration takes place in a safe, orderly and regular manner.

9. Country case studies can help identify critical policy responses to population issues.

In Niger, accelerating the demographic transition towards lower levels of fertility and mortality will require concerted efforts to improve and expand access to high-quality health care, including for sexual and reproductive health and family planning. Nepal's effective family planning programmes, coupled with increased female education and male outmigration, have led to far-reaching demographic change within a relatively short period. Jamaica's ageing society illustrates the experience of countries in an advanced stage of the demographic transition, where both rapid fertility decline and outmigration are creating conditions conducive to population decline.

10. Large gaps in data availability add uncertainty to population estimates and projections.

More than half of the LDCs have not conducted a population and housing census since 2015, and more than 95 per cent have incomplete registration of births or deaths. In LLDCs and SIDS, greater efforts are needed to strengthen statistical capacity. Governments, international organizations and other partners should continue working together to strengthen statistical systems and to ensure the availability of comprehensive, accurate and integrated demographic data that can be used to monitor progress towards the SDGs and other internationally agreed development goals.



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