

CPD 2024

**Past and Future Demographic Trends:
Fears, Facts and Policy Implications**

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At ICPD 1994

Cairo, September 13, 1994. All the countries have approved one of the most transformative and consequential agreements of the United Nations, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). During the past 30 years, with its application you have changed the world for the better. I am honoured to be here celebrating with you, the leaders of this movement. You saved lives, helped empower women and gave young people a chance. Your dedication led many countries to reform their laws and policies to enhance and protect sexual and reproductive rights and promote gender equity. You helped integrate the population into your development strategies and assured that the principles of the ICPD were incorporated into major global development frameworks, most notably the SDGs. There is still a lot you must do to realize the ICPD agenda fully, as you say in the political declaration, but now we have new emerging trends that require new visions and strategies while preserving Cairo's rights-based and integral approach. That's what I will focus on in my presentation.

Demographic fears and facts

We are living in a time of increasing information and misinformation about demographic changes, where fears spread quickly and incessantly. Daily news from demographic trends in Europe, Russia, China, Republic of Korea, the United States, and several other countries only compound these fears. Current and future demographic situations are presented through a narrative showing the world at the brink of a demographic disaster, where societies will become less productive, burdened by a large and dependent older population, overwhelmed by unexpected migrants, and where the family unit, as it used to be, disappears. As presented, this cataclysmic scenario is frightening for all of us.

Fears are helpful because they alert and mobilize us and can help us be better prepared. However, excessive, and irrational fear can paralyze and make us look at reality with horse blinders, limiting our ability to make the best decisions. This renewed interest in demographic trends makes me, personally and professionally, as a demographer, very happy. But at the same time, I would be concerned if political decisions are taken based on fears, not facts. Luckily, population data, both in amount and quality, have improved and expanded, and demography has a unique and incomparable predictive power to alert us of coming changes.

Today, I will walk you through the four most challenging demographic trends I have identified: 1) Population decline, 2) Very low fertility, 3) Rapid ageing, and 4) International migration. For each, I will talk about the fears they elicit, the facts behind, and some of their policy implications.

Trend #1: Population decline

Today, we live in a different demographic world where fears have shifted from excessive population growth to population decline. 'Population explosion' is no longer considered relevant. For some, a population reduction would be positive both for the economy and the environment and therefore, they think governments need to start planning for a world where population is declining. Others consider that there are more negative than positive implications and, thus, the need to increase fertility and, incentivize immigration.

What are the facts? United Nations population estimates and projections show that, although the world population is expected to continue increasing until the last quarter of the century, the balance between births and deaths will be negative in many countries. Higher life expectancy will contribute to partially reducing this impact. In about 30 countries with negative natural growth in 2024, 23 are Europeans. But from today to 2050,

unless there is a fertility rise or a significant increase in the number of immigrants, in about 60 countries from all regions their population size would decrease. However, the population in many countries is still increasing, as in the case of Sub-Saharan African countries, which would add close to 900 million between today and 2050. These countries and others from Asia still have considerable demographic inertia that will allow them to increase their population for many more decades, even if population growth rates are declining. These countries will need huge investments to strengthen human capital.

But a critical challenge in terms of population growth, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, is brought by rapid urbanization. By 2050, 68% of people will be living in urban areas. Cities in Africa, like Kinshasa and Luanda, have added a second floor every 15 years or less in the last three decades, posing significant urban planning challenges. I always asked myself how local governments can overcome these challenges. The short answer is that they can't. UN-HABITAT estimates that by 2020, half of the urban population in Sub-Saharan Africa live in slums, with rates in Kinshasa and Luanda at 78% and 63%, respectively.

Urbanization also intersects with climate change. Globally, over 815 million people live in "low elevation coastal zones", and 84% are in urban areas, heightening their vulnerability to climate change-related risks like heatwaves, which have a more pronounced impact in cities due to the heat island effect. Just this month, on April 3, Mali recorded 48.5°C, and the Gabriel-Touré Hospital at Bamako announced an important surge in excess deaths.

In summary, in the coming years, more and more countries will join the list of nations where the population could be declining. Each country may face differently what to do, but the options are limited. On the other hand, for many countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the increase in urban population, with the added climate change impacts, will be one of the most critical concern you must address. Flexible and forward-looking urban planning tools that engage local communities and focus on land access needs for low-income people are some of your policy options.

Trend #2: Fertility Decline

Fertility has been declining everywhere, as predicted by the demographic transition theory. What was not anticipated was that once countries reached the replacement level (2.05), fertility would continue declining. The fertility decline can be seen as a blessing because it represents women and couples' accomplishments in having the number of children they want, as recognized in the ICPD 1994. It also has had a favourable impact on reducing infant, child, and maternal mortality. But fertility has continued declining well below replacement, reaching levels never experienced by any country before. An increasing number of countries are joining the below replacement club. In 2024, 21 countries already had total fertility rates under 1.4 children.

Policy interventions have shown that there is no easy fix, as it is not only that women and couples who have kids are deciding to have less than two, but it is also that many of them don't want children or marry at all. Some low- and very-low-fertility countries are implementing measures to reverse the trend, or at least to eliminate restrictions and create better conditions for couples and women having children. Some of these policies benefit women and families, and even in some cases, they have reduced children's poverty. But they are failing everywhere in reversing fertility's downward trend. Neither family-oriented policies nor openly pronatalist policies have been able to change this trend. That's why some experts are increasingly questioning whether governments should continue spending this amount on policies that do not work. According to my colleague Francesco Billari, the answer is no, so he proposes for Italy to involve the private sector and not only expect the Government to solve the crisis.

We are facing an apparent lack of policy options, as even well-intentioned policy interventions, such as facilitating a better harmony between women's participation in activities outside their household and reproduction and increasing gender equity in general, do not necessarily lead to increased fertility. Although they can be considered preconditions, and in some countries with extreme gender inequity, they can be helpful. Either we are dealing with a complete impossibility, or we truly need to understand better the factors influencing decisions to have children. For many women and couples, the question seems not about whether they want to get married and have children but about if and why they should.

This conundrum must lead us to rethink what reproduction means in the current global context, where women and couples must contend with the ever-growing list of requirements that having and raising kids involves in terms of time, resources, and support to manage the complexities of parenthood. Welfare policies often overlook the investments parents make and the high costs of raising children through the age at which they are ready to fly by themselves.

If this is true, the development of more effective interventions to increase fertility will require us to rethink what building a family and having children means for people now, considering that it is not only fertility and marriage that are being re-examined globally, particularly by women, it is also what societies, both governments and private sectors, offer to them to do so, given the constraints that the same society imposes on them. This leads us to the broader question: how much is society willing to pay for the cost of reproduction considering the strong commitment parents, particularly mothers, make to raise children until they become emotionally and economically independent? We are not even considering here the heart-breaking issue of women and couples living now in stressful humanitarian and war situations that cannot exercise the basic right to reproduce.

In sum, current policies to increase fertility are ineffective when it comes to fertility decline. I propose re-examining the factors that influence today's women and couples' decision to have children, including the gender social contract that regulates labour, as the reproduction model we still use is outdated and no longer reflects modern trends, roles, and people's expectations.

Trend #3: Population ageing

Over the last decades, in most regions, there has been a complete reshaping of the age structure of the population, with a substantial increase in both the number and the proportion of people 65 and over, due to the combined effect of declining fertility, the arrival of larger cohorts because of high fertility rates in the past, and the increase in longevity. Today, the world's inhabitants live 25 years more than in 1950 when life expectancy was less than 47 years, thanks to improvements in living standards, prevention of illnesses and increases in health care coverage. One of the biggest achievements of humanity.

From more than 800 million today, the population of older persons will double by 2050. Maybe because of this process's enormous challenges, David Bloom and Leo Zucker titled their recent article "Ageing is the real population bomb". Ageing is being presented as one of the biggest challenges humanity must face now and in the future. Changes in population structure by age leading to ageing indeed bring challenges associated with increased health care demands, a relative reduction and ageing of the labour force, financial pressure on pension systems, and overwhelming demand for social and health services and care. On the other side, as analysed in the National Transfers Account project, it also offers the possibility to harness the first and second demographic dividends, which initially lead to a boost in economic growth and living standards, and as the population ages,

can lead to higher savings for retirement and more investments in youth. Other benefits come from increased work participation by women and a fairer division of unpaid care work (gender dividend).

As population ageing is one of the expected results of the demographic transition, we may expect that policymakers know well about coming trends and inform sound policy decisions. But how prepared are middle- and low-income countries for these changes? If we take the case of pensions, they are not ready to ensure older people's economic security in the future. For example, in most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, partially because of employment informality, an average of 45% of workers are not contributing to or affiliated with a pension scheme, with little change over many years, even after significant pension system reforms that took place in the region. The situation in Asia is not so different. Some countries are facing the challenge of low coverage, particularly for the poor, by increasing coverage of self-employed workers, and by increasing pension benefits for those over 65 through non-contributory (social pensions), which are gaining importance as a tool to stave off the adverse effects of this trend and decrease poverty in older age. But this may not be sufficient or can become too costly.

Although many elderly rely on alternative income sources, such as family support, this source is also at risk. Questions about who is currently taking care of older adults or who will take care of them in the future are increasingly important, especially in countries where fertility is very low, simply because the number of family members that can provide care is becoming increasingly reduced. Many see the so-called "care economy" as an excellent opportunity for countries dealing with this deficit. ILO, for example, has estimated that by 2035, long-term care services for older people in Indonesia will help create about 4.3 million direct jobs.

When it comes to population ageing, our progress as a society must be measured by how the demand for social services by an increased number of older people will be addressed, considering many older people will become dependent and poor in a context of reduction of family support. The task ahead for countries to deal with these challenges requires a long-term vision that contributes to changing the ways individuals and societies invest for their older ages and that faces the very challenging policy choices that need to be made.

Trend 4: International migration

Fear of strangers seems to be embedded in our DNA. Some of our ancestors did not always have a good experience with unexpected visitors. The fact is that, globally, international migrants grew to 281 million in 2020. Additionally, political strife and environmental crises drive forced migration, with most displaced internally but some crossing borders. Latin America has handled the influx of more than 6 million Venezuelans since 2016 remarkably well—a response seen as unexpectedly effective given the region's limited experience with such a scale of migration. At the same time, estimates of global refugee and asylum-seekers worldwide for September 2023 project up to about 37 million and 7 million, respectively. These migrants are frequently exposed to severe risks and human rights violations in the different migration corridors, such as robbery, diseases, and sexual assault of women and girls. A new report from IOM shows that despite unprecedented border closures during COVID-19, mobility has surged again.

The economic benefits of migration are well-known for both countries of destination and countries of origin. U.S. Congress bi-partisan group found that the US economy will be about 2% larger by 2034 than without this immigration. For countries of origin, remittances are crucial. The World Bank estimated \$630 billion in the volume of remittances to low and middle-income nations in 2022, which represents triple their development aid and is close to the foreign direct investment level. These funds significantly impact economies, exceeding 20% of GDP in several countries.



Developed economies that face the risk of population and labour force decline and increased ageing can continue to meet the new demand for jobs through immigration, as the supply will be there, and migrants will continue choosing countries whose economies offer more opportunities, including stable employment, higher salaries, better social benefits, and political stability. Between 1970 and 2020, Germany's population increased by 5 million due to immigration, avoiding a decline of 10 million that would have occurred if migration had not happened. However, small countries with a tiny labour market and affected by skilled labour emigration may not be able to do this easily.

Summarizing, replacement migration is an option, even if competition for skilled labour may become more extended. This is one example of why managing migration is complex, multi-layered, and even risky. And some of the concerns of receiving countries are real. But the highest risk we face is the increased weaponization of migration in political discourse without considering the economic, demographic, and social benefits for the countries involved. Luckily, the countries can rely on the Global Migration, which was adopted in 2018 by the General Assembly with the endorsement of 152 votes.

Today

Let's return to 1994 and reflect on how far we have come. Ask yourselves what ICPD has achieved— and the tremendous work that went into developing and building consensus around one very complex matter. It is true that there are some setbacks. But this 30-year commemoration of ICPD is an opportunity to bring the same commitment you showed in 1994 to look at our present reality and agree on a new agenda for the future. The good news is that ICPD was not an addition but the foundation for a comprehensive and rights-based approach to population and development. With 30 years of implementation, we now understand what has worked and hasn't, so there's a foundation for new solutions. Let's renew our population and family policies by integrating better these four trends considering the present political, economic, cultural and demographic context. Let's ensure that the facts about current and projected demographic challenges, and not the fear of them, determine our path toward a future where everyone, everywhere, can flourish here on Earth.

