

Sub-Saharan Africa's growing population of older persons

1. The number of older persons in sub-Saharan Africa has doubled since 1990 and is projected to more than triple between 2015 and 2050

In 2015, there were 46 million people aged 60 years or over in sub-Saharan Africa, an increase from 23 million in 1990. In 2050, a projected 161 million older persons will reside in the region. Notably, the growth rate of the older population of sub-Saharan Africa that is projected for the 2040s is faster than that experienced by any other region since 1950.¹

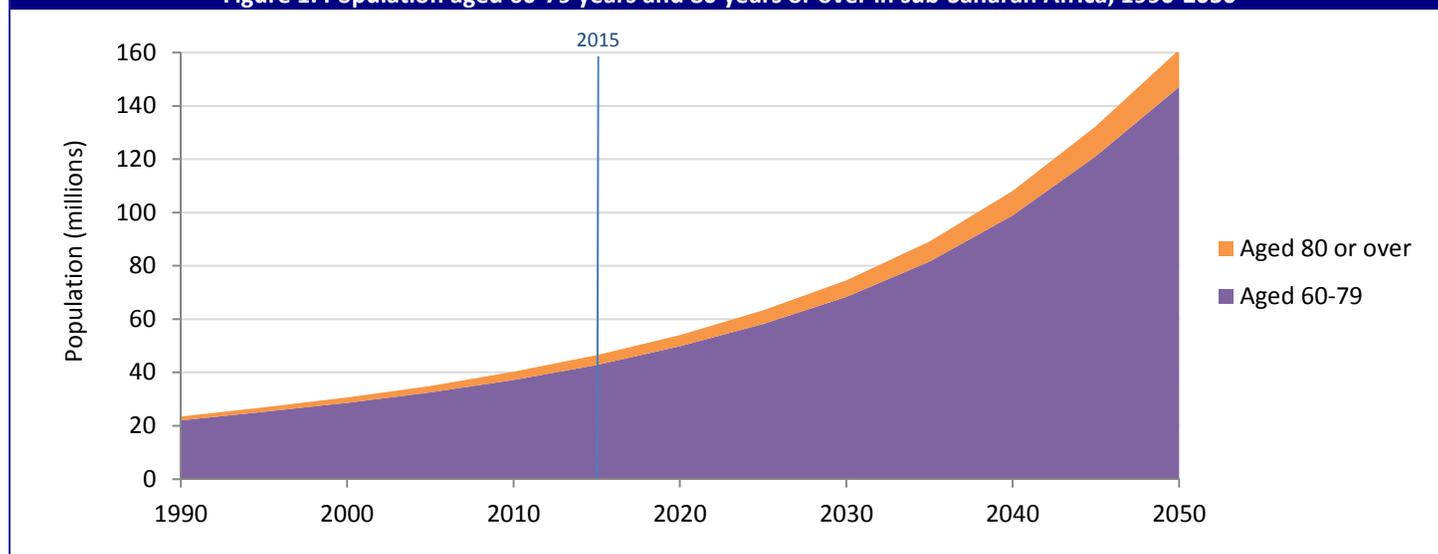
The growing number of older persons in sub-Saharan Africa is a legacy of the high fertility that produced increasingly large birth cohorts during the twentieth century, as well as improving rates of survival to older ages. An estimated 40 per cent of the cohort born in the region in 1950-1955 survived to celebrate a sixtieth birthday in 2010-2015, with 15 per cent of the birth cohort expected to live to age 80. By contrast,

among those born in 2000-2005, 66 per cent are expected to live to age 60 and 35 per cent to age 80.

2. Across sub-Saharan Africa, there are marked differences in the percentage of older persons in the population

Although older persons comprised just under 5 per cent of the overall population of the region in 2015, in a number of countries the proportion of older persons was much greater. More than 15 per cent of the populations of Mauritius and Réunion were aged 60 years or over in 2015, making them the most aged populations of sub-Saharan Africa. In Seychelles, 11 per cent of the population was aged 60 years or over in 2015, and older persons comprised nearly 8 per cent of South Africa's population. At the other end of the spectrum are countries such as Angola, Burkina Faso, Gambia and Uganda, where older persons accounted for less than 4 per cent of the total population in 2015.

Figure 1. Population aged 60-79 years and 80 years or over in sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2050



Data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015). *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision DVD Edition*.

3. Fewer than one in five older persons in sub-Saharan Africa receives an old-age pension

Retirement pensions or similar programmes for income support at older ages are critical to the social protection of older persons. According to recent data, just under 17 per cent of people of pensionable age in sub-Saharan Africa received any pension, meaning that the overwhelming majority of older persons had to rely instead on their own labour earnings or savings, assistance from relatives, or charity for support. Owing to the prevalence of informal employment in the region, only a small minority — 8.4 per cent — of the 2014 labour force contributed to pension insurance, indicating that low pension coverage could be perpetuated as current workers reach retirement age.²

4. The labour force participation of older persons in Africa is the highest in the world

In most of sub-Saharan Africa, retirement is a privilege extended primarily to the minority of persons who work in the formal economy and thus have access to contributory pension programmes.² Non-contributory pensions can effectively reduce poverty in old age but are not yet implemented in most countries of the region. As a result, a majority of older persons in sub-Saharan Africa have no choice but to continue to work as long as they are physically able.

Among those aged 65 years or over in Africa, 52 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women were active in the labour force in 2015. By comparison, in Latin America and the Caribbean, 38 per cent of older men and 17 per cent of older women were working, and in Europe, only 10 per cent of older men and 6 per cent of older women were working.³

In general, countries with relatively low rates of pension coverage tend to have high levels of labour force participation among older persons. In Zimbabwe, for example, where less than 10 per cent of people of pensionable age received any pension, 75 per cent of men and 65 per cent of women aged 65 or over were active in the labour force. By contrast, more than 92 per cent of older persons in South Africa received a pension and their participation in the labour force was relatively rare, with only 9 per cent of men and 3 per cent of women aged 65 years or over who were working in 2015.³

In addition to their labour force participation, older men and women in sub-Saharan Africa are making other vital contributions to their families and communities. Many older persons whose adult children have migrated in search of work, or who have died as a result of HIV/AIDS, are the main care-providers for their grandchildren. In Zimbabwe and Namibia, an estimated 60 per cent of orphaned children were being cared for by their grandmothers.⁴

5. Health systems in sub-Saharan Africa are confronted with a growing burden of illness due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that are associated with old age

Communicable diseases continue to account for more than half of all deaths in sub-Saharan Africa, but non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases, cause more than half of the total burden of disability in the region.⁵ Since the prevalence of NCD-related disability tends to increase with age, a growing population of older persons implies an increase in the demand on health systems for the prevention and treatment of NCDs and their associated complications.

6. Ensuring the well-being of the growing population of older persons in sub-Saharan Africa will be essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

Meeting the needs of the growing numbers of older persons in sub-Saharan Africa will be critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, the goals on eradicating poverty, ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being at all ages, achieving gender equality, ensuring full and productive employment and decent work for all, reducing inequalities between and within countries, and making human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

7. More data are needed to understand the status and needs of older persons in Africa

In 2002, African governments formally adopted the African Union Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing (AU Plan), which built upon the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). The AU Plan committed the signatory member states to develop and implement policies on ageing that are integral to national development and poverty reduction. However, efforts to monitor the implementation of MIPAA and the AU Plan in Africa have been limited in part by the dearth of data on older persons in the region. More and better data and statistics on older persons in Africa are urgently needed in order to ensure continued progress in the implementation of MIPAA and the AU Plan, as well as the 2030 Agenda.

NOTES

¹United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015). *World Population Ageing 2015*.

²International Labour Organization (2014). *World Social Protection Report 2014/15: Building economic recovery, inclusive development and social justice*. Geneva: ILO.

³ILOSTAT Database. Available from <http://www.ilo.org/ilostat/>. Accessed September 2015.

⁴UNICEF (2003). *Africa's orphaned generations*.

⁵World Health Organization (2014). *Global Health Estimates 2014 Summary Tables*. Geneva: WHO.