

Population Facts



United Nations

Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Population Division | www.unpopulation.org

April 2019 No. 2019/2

Living arrangements of older persons around the world

Household living arrangements of persons aged 65 years or over are an important factor associated with the health, economic status and well-being of older persons.¹ While some older persons live alone, others reside with a spouse or a partner, or with their children or grandchildren in multi-generational households. Understanding the patterns and trends in the living arrangements of older persons is relevant for global efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular Goal 1 on poverty, Goal 2 on hunger and Goal 3 on health. In 2002, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing identified older persons' living arrangements as a topic requiring more research and attention.²

This brief summarizes selected key findings from a recent analysis of the size and composition of households with at least one older person, using the latest edition of the United Nations Database on Household Size and Composition 2018.³

1. Globally, older persons live in households that range in size from 2 to 12 persons on average

According to most recent estimates,⁴ in countries of Europe and Northern America, older persons tend to live in relatively small households with fewer than three persons in total. For example, the average size of such households was 1.9 persons in France, Switzerland and the United Kingdom and 2.1 in the United States of America. Some countries in Eastern Asia and Latin America had low values as well: in South Korea and Argentina, households including an older person had just 2.4 persons on average.

At the other extreme, across much of Southern Asia and Africa, households with older persons included more than six persons on average. The largest average size of households with older members was observed in Senegal and the Gambia, averaging 12.1 and 12.6 persons respectively, followed by Afghanistan with 9.4 persons per household.

2. Living arrangements of older persons vary greatly across countries and regions

Across the 137 countries or areas with available data, living arrangements of persons aged 65 years or older differed markedly, reflecting differences in family size and personal behaviours that were influenced by social and cultural norms as well as economic conditions.

Living with a child or with extended family members was the most common living arrangement among older persons in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, whereas in Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand, living with a spouse only was the most common arrangement, followed by living alone. For example, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, more than 90 per cent of persons aged 65 years or over co-resided with their children or lived with extended family members and fewer than 1 per cent lived alone. By contrast, in Estonia and Finland, around 37 and 36 per cent of older persons lived alone.

3. About one in five older persons in Europe and Northern America live alone

Across the 137 countries with available data, the proportion of older persons living alone ranged from 37 per cent in Estonia to 0.3 per cent in Afghanistan (figure 1).⁵ Older persons were also likely to live alone in Finland (36 per cent), the Netherlands (35.4), Norway (34.7), Switzerland (35.2), and Sao Tome and Principe (34.4), the only country in Africa with such a large share of older persons living alone.

Living arrangements of older persons are the result of individual preferences and available resources, as well as the social, economic or health constraints that people face as they grow older. In general, the highest proportion of older persons living alone was found in Europe, Northern America, Australia and New Zealand. Within Europe, living arrangements of older persons differed markedly in Southern Europe from what was observed in Northern,

Eastern and Western Europe. For example, one in five older persons lived alone in Greece, Portugal, Serbia, and Spain, while in Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden and the United Kingdom, the ratio was about one in three. Lower proportions of older persons living alone were found in Africa and Asia, with Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Gambia, Guinea and Senegal ranking the lowest in the world.⁶

Among African and Asian countries, intermediate proportions of living alone were found in Angola (18.7 per cent), Egypt (16.7) and Iran (18.1). Most Latin American and Caribbean countries fell in an intermediate position, except for Argentina and Uruguay, which had, respectively, as many as 21.2 and 26.7 per cent of their older population living alone. More typical values for that region are 14.6 in Brazil, 14.4 in Ecuador, 14.6 in Peru and 12.6 per cent of older persons living alone in Mexico.

4. Older women are more likely than older men to live alone

In the 135 countries with data available by sex, women were more likely to live alone than men. The reasons for the higher proportion of women living alone were: 1) higher life expectancy of women;⁷ 2) higher prevalence of widowhood among women; and 3) higher prevalence of remarriage among men after widowhood or divorce.

The largest gender gaps in living alone were found in Europe. Twenty countries in Europe had differences of more than 20 percentage points in the proportion living alone among women aged 65 years or older compared to

men in the same age group. The countries with the largest differences were Serbia (44.8 percentage points higher for women), Austria (29), Switzerland (28), France (25.6), the Netherlands (25.6) and Hungary (25.3), which had a lower ratio of men to women in the older population⁸ and a higher prevalence of widowhood among older women compared to other developed countries.

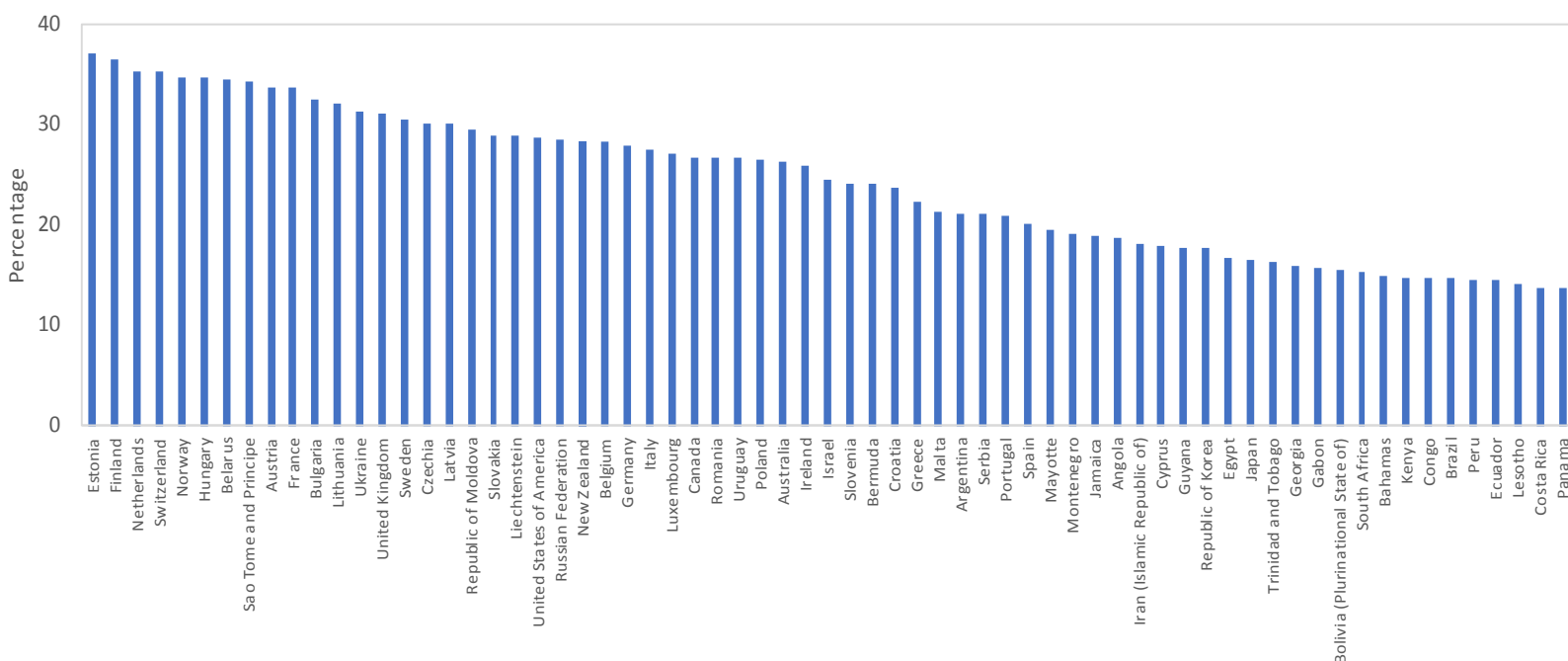
Contrary to the typical findings, in about 22 countries in Africa, the Caribbean and Central America, living alone was more common among older men than among older women.⁹ The highest shares of men living alone were found in Sao Tome and Principe (38.5 per cent), Jamaica (21.7), Guyana (19.5), Panama (16.6), Botswana (16.2), the Dominican Republic (13.8), Ghana (12.2), Haiti (11.5) and Namibia (9.0).

5. Most older persons in Asia, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean live with children or with extended families

Across the 105 countries with data available, the proportion of older persons living with at least one child ranged from 42 per cent in Jordan and 36 per cent in Iran, to 4 per cent in Senegal. Countries with the highest prevalence of this type of co-residence were located in Latin America, Northern Africa, and Latin America. In Europe, notably, Spain, Italy and Greece, 20 per cent of older persons lived with at least one child.

In 67 of the 100 countries with available data, the majority of older persons lived with their extended families. The share of older persons living with extended family ranged

Figure 1. Proportion of the population aged 65 years or over living alone, most recent estimates



from 88.2 per cent in Tajikistan, 85.6 in Senegal and 84.7 in Sierra Leone, to 13.5 per cent in the United States of America and 9.9 in Canada. Extended-family households were common for older persons in Africa. For all countries in that region, except Egypt, Burundi and Sao Tome and Principe, at least half of older persons lived in households that included extended family members. In contrast, extended family households were a much less common living arrangements among older persons in Europe and Northern America; fewer than 15 per cent of older persons lived in this type of household in Canada, Italy and the United States of America.

Households in which older persons lived with a non-relative, accounted for a small fraction of households in all countries or areas reviewed. This type of living arrangement was most prevalent in South Sudan (15.2 per cent), the Maldives (15.1), Côte d'Ivoire (13.4), Tanzania (12.3), Haiti (11.5) and Honduras (11.4), but it was less common elsewhere.

6. Patterns of co-residence with older and younger children vary by region and sex

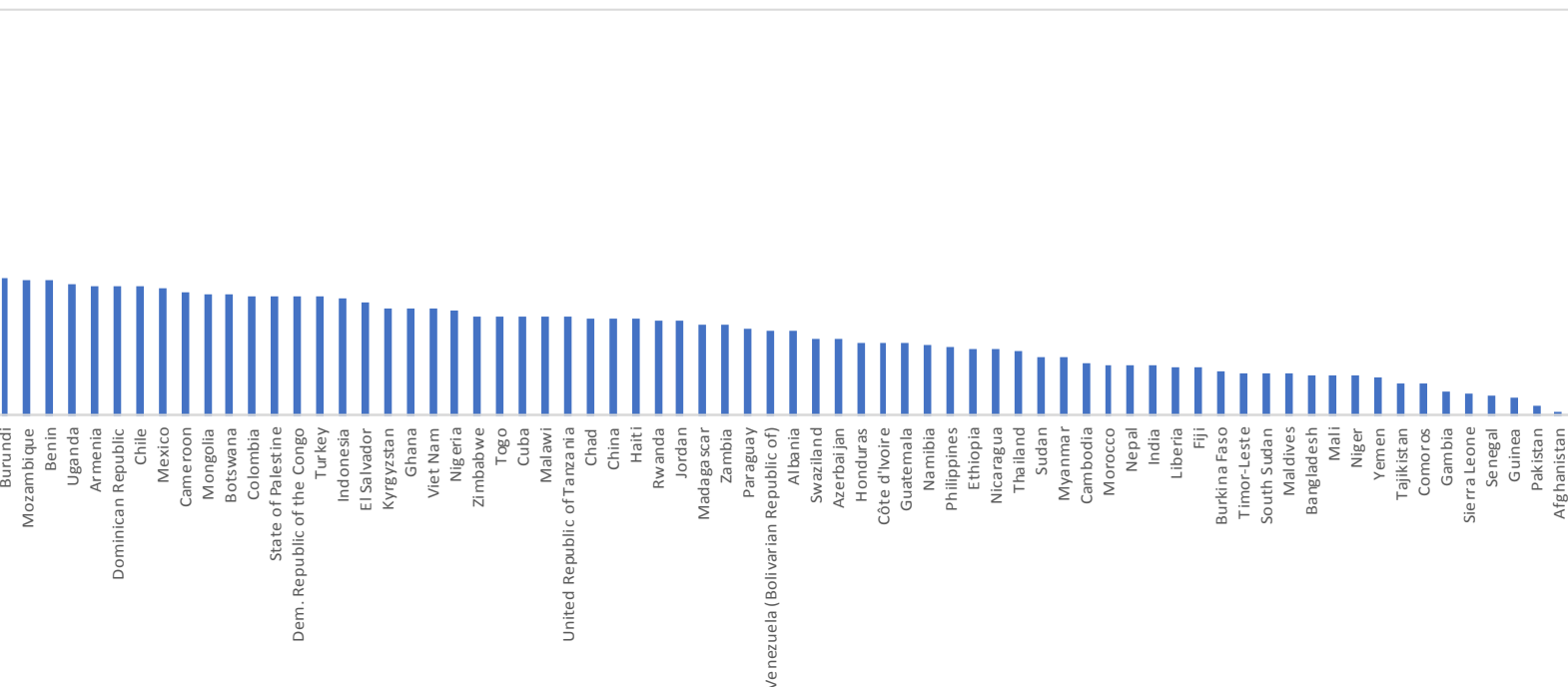
In the 98 countries with data that allowed to identify the age of children who co-reside with older persons, the share of older persons who lived with children younger than 20 years ranged from less than 1 per cent in all European countries and the United States of America, to more than 10 per cent in most African countries. Living with children aged 20 years or younger was most common in countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In many instances, this can be associated with generally larger family sizes due to high fertility levels in this region as compared with other regions with lower fertility and generally smaller family

sizes.

Globally, older men were more likely to live with children under age 20 years, while older women were more likely to live with children over that age. These differences by sex can be explained to a large extent by the typical age difference between spouses and by the reproductive life span of women. Since childbearing is rare for women over age 45 in almost all countries, it is uncommon to observe women over 65 years of age with children under age 20. However, since husbands are on average older than their wives,¹⁰ they are more likely to co-reside with children under age 20 when they reach older ages.

The prevalence of older persons co-residing with children under age 20 was highest in African countries. However, the prevalence was significantly higher for men than for women. For example, the percentage of older persons co-residing with children under age 20 was 7.7 per cent for older women versus 39.9 per cent for older men in Niger, 5.4 versus 34.9 per cent in Chad and 3.6 versus 29.4 per cent in Ethiopia.

The proportion of older persons living with children over age 20 ranged from 9.1 per cent in Switzerland to more than 75 per cent in Morocco, Yemen, Senegal, Maldives, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Older women were more likely than older men to live with children over age 20 in 82 out of the 98 countries with the pertinent data. The percentage of older persons co-residing with children over age 20 was 39.5 per cent for women versus 23 per cent for men in Angola, 57.5 versus 44.7 per cent in Panama and 58.2 versus 46.8 per cent in Colombia.



7. Skipped-generation households are common in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean

Skipped-generation households consist of households in which grandparents live with their grandchildren without the parents of the grandchildren being present in the household.

Research indicates that skipped-generation households are more common in countries where migrants leave their children behind or where high adult mortality related to AIDS, civil conflict or war is prevalent,¹¹ because in these situations children are often left in the care of grandparents.

Considering the 93 countries with available data, skipped-generation households were most common in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Central America. In Lesotho, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia, more than 30 per cent of older persons lived in skipped-generation households. These countries also had a high prevalence of children orphaned by AIDS and other causes.¹² In the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras and Jamaica, more than 10 per cent of older persons lived with their grandchildren only. Although skipped-generation households tend to be less common in Asia, there are exceptions, such as Cambodia and the Philippines, where over 10 per cent of persons aged 60 years or over lived in such households.

8. Older women are more likely than older men to live in skipped-generation households

In countries with available data, the proportion of older persons living in skipped-generation households was higher among older women than among older men. In Lesotho, Malawi and Uganda, 35 to 41 per cent of older women lived in skipped-generation households, while the share for men ranged from 24 to 31 per cent. The highest female-male differences were found in Namibia (14.1 percentage points) and Rwanda (18).

9. The share of skipped-generation households has increased in most African countries

For 67 countries, three data points were available between 1980 and 2015, allowing for a limited analysis of trends in skipped-generation households. Figure 2 presents trends for nine countries: three with a rise, three with no change and three with a decline in the prevalence of skipped-generation households over time. Thus, the nine countries illustrate the types of trends observed globally over this period.

Figure 2. Trends in the proportion of skipped-generation households

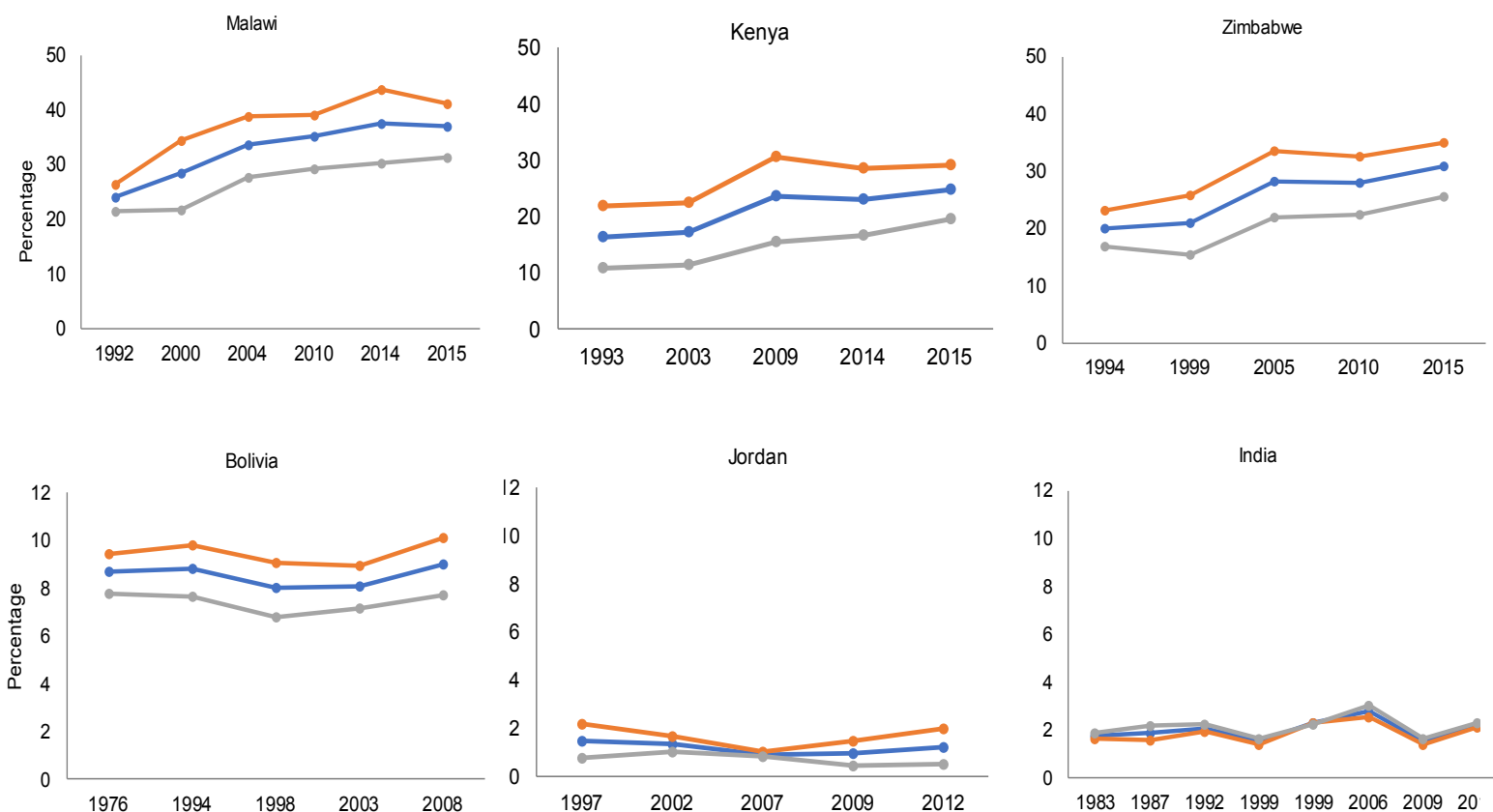
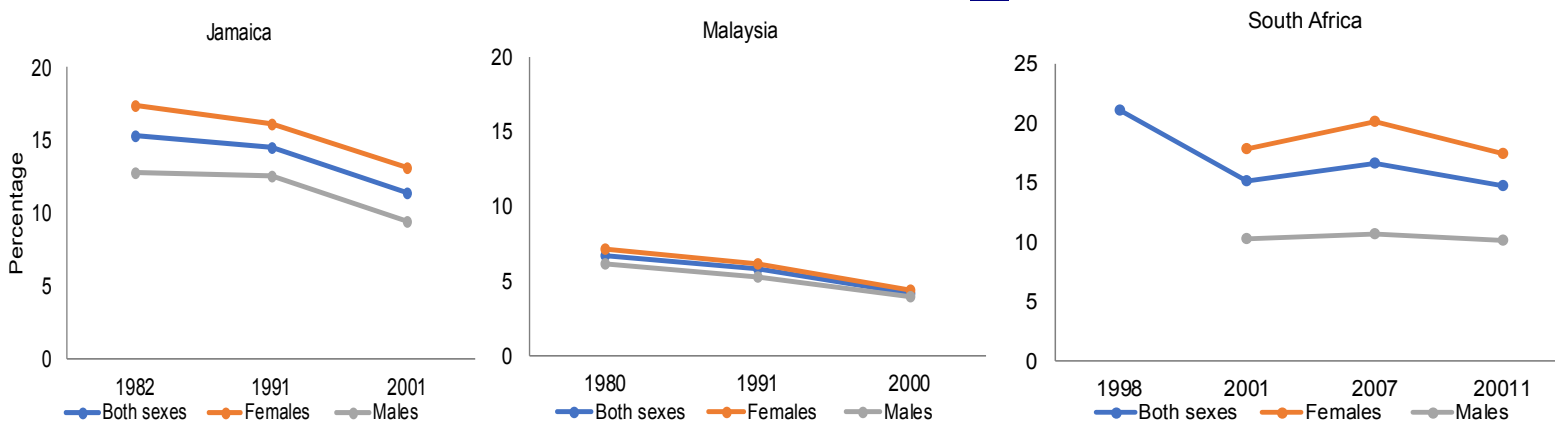


Figure 2. Trends in the proportion of skipped-generation households cont'd



In the first group, 34 of the 67 countries, including 19 in Africa, experienced an increase in the prevalence of skipped-generation households. Some countries, notably Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe, saw an increase of more than 10 percentage points over this period. Another 15 countries in Asia and in the Americas, experienced an increase in the share of skipped-generation households between 1980 and 2015.

In the second group comprising 14 countries in which the prevalence of skipped-generation households remained largely unchanged over the same period: Bolivia, Brazil, Burundi, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ghana, India, Jordan, Liberia, Peru, Romania, Senegal and Turkey.

In the third group, the prevalence of skipped-generation households declined between 1980 and 2015 in the 15 countries: Armenia, Chile, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Jamaica, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Panama, Portugal, South Africa and Uruguay. In Panama, for example, the prevalence of such households declined from 7.8 in 1982 to 6.3 in 2010. In the fourth group, four countries did not show a clear increasing or decreasing trend over time. For example, in Mexico, the prevalence has increased from 3.4 in 1990 to 4.7 per cent in 2000 and declined to 3.7 per cent in 2015.

NOTES

1. Reher, D. and Requena, M. (2018). Living Alone in Later Life: A Global Perspective. *Population and Development Review*, vol. 44, No. 3, pp. 427-454.
2. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002 (United Nations, 2002e, Chap. I, resolution 1, annex II).
3. The United Nations Database on Household Composition and Living Arrangements of Older Persons, 2018, available from www.unpopulation.org.
4. The most recent estimates refer to the year 2010 or later for the majority of the countries and for the remaining countries between 2000 and 2009.
5. Details on data sources used for the 2018 United Nations Database on Household Size and Composition can be found in the forthcoming technical paper on Patterns and trends in household size and composition: evidence from a United Nations dataset (www.unpopulation.org).
6. Countries are classified as 'low', 'intermediate' and 'high' based on percentiles, as follows: below the 25th percentile, countries were classified as 'low', countries below the 5th percentile were classified as 'extremely low'. Countries between the 25th and 75th percentile were classified as 'intermediate', and above the 75th percentile, countries were classified as 'high'.
7. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). *World Population Ageing 2017* (ST/ESA/SER.A/408).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Centro Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Demografía (CELADE) (2002). *Los Adultos Mayores En América Latina y el Caribe: Datos E Indicadores*. Santiago de Chile: CELADE.
10. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2005). *Living Arrangements of Older persons Around the World*. New York: United Nations.
11. Zachary Zimmer and Jay Teachman (2009). Household Composition among Elders in Sub-Saharan Africa in the Context of HIV/AIDS *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 71, No. 4, pp. 1086-1099.
12. UNICEF (2015). *The State of the World's Children 2015: Reimagine the Future: Innovation for Every Child*. Available from https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/SOWC_2015_Summary_and_Tables.pdf.