



The UN reports global asymmetries in population growth

A UN study highlights the rapid population growth in some countries versus the growing ageing populations and challenges ahead. John Zarocostas reports from Geneva.

For the **World Population Prospects 2022** see <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/World-Population-Prospects-2022>

The global population continues to grow—but at a slower pace—and is projected to reach 8 billion people on Nov 15, 2022, grow to around 9.7 billion in 2050, and peak in the 2080s at around 10.4 billion and remain at that level until the end of the century, according to the *World Population Prospects 2022* produced by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. India is expected to surpass China as the most populous country in 2023.

This report projects that the global population is growing at its slowest rate since 1950, having fallen below 1% in 2020. “These trends are evidence of the impressive progress we have made in reducing poverty, in expanding access to sexual and reproductive health services, and enabling girls to get an education and seek employment. Population dynamics are inextricably tied to gender equality, and the health and human rights of women and girls”, Natalia Kanem, Executive Director of the UN Population Fund, told *The Lancet*.

Similarly, UN secretary-general António Guterres said this is an occasion “to marvel at the advancements in health that have extended lifespans and dramatically reduced maternal and child mortality rates”. However, although the report says that global life expectancy at birth reached 72.8 years in 2019—up almost 9 years since 1990, and with further reductions in mortality to average 77.2 years in 2050—in 2021, life expectancy for the lowest-income countries lagged 7 years behind the global average. The COVID-19 pandemic also affected global life expectancy at birth, which fell to 71.0 years in 2021.

The report states that recent demographic trends “are harbingers

of future challenges” to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Countries undergoing rapid population growth, most of which are in Africa, it notes, must provide schooling and health care to growing numbers of children, and increase quality education and employment opportunities for increasing numbers of youth.

The report says that more than half of the projected increase in the global population up to 2050 will be concentrated in eight low-income and middle-income countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Tanzania. Overall, countries in sub-Saharan Africa are predicted to contribute more than half of the increase anticipated until 2050, with the population expected to almost double, surpassing 2 billion inhabitants.

The increase presents challenges but also opportunities. Samira Asma, WHO assistant director-general for data, analytics, and delivery for impact, told *The Lancet* that the substantial population growth will increase the number of potential workers that can be hired as health-care workers and help to address an already problematic scarcity. According to Elhadj As Sy, chair of the board of the Kofi Annan Foundation, countries in the region need to prioritise “heavy investments” in primary health care to reduce child mortality and maternal mortality, which is crucial, and investments in getting more girls in schools.

However, “high population growth rates of 3% per year in some African countries is just not sustainable. The governments cannot meet the needs of the population”, Anastasia J Gage, professor at the Department of International Health

and Sustainable Development at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, Tulane University, USA, told *The Lancet*, and there have to be some efforts to reduce fertility.

This situation is in stark contrast with countries with ageing populations resulting from increased lifespans and reduced fertility rates. According to the report, the fertility rate has “fallen markedly” over recent decades in many countries, and today two-thirds of the global population live in a country or area where “fertility is below 2.1 births per woman”, roughly the level required for zero growth in the long run for a population with low mortality. Therefore, the population of 61 countries or areas is projected to decrease by 1% or more between 2022 and 2050 due to sustained low levels of fertility, and in some cases, increased rates of emigration.

The share of the global population aged 65 years and older is projected to rise from 9.7% in 2022 to 16.4% in 2050. According to the report, projections indicate that by 2050 more than one in every four people (26.9%, up from 18.7% in 2022) in Europe and North America could be aged 65 years or older. Similarly, in eastern and southeastern Asia, the proportion aged 65 years or older could increase from around 13% in 2022 to 26% in 2050.

As a result, the report advises countries with ageing populations to “take steps to adapt public programmes to the growing proportion of older persons, including sound social security and pension systems, the establishment of universal health care and long-term care systems”.

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