

Overcoming short-termism to secure a better future
Presentation on demographic trends and future scenarios
ECOSOC High-level Segment, 20 July 2023

Remarks of ASG Maria-Francesca Spatolisano

The report of the Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, cautions that the “gravitational pull of short-term thinking” is “strong and growing.” It calls, instead, for **long-term** and intergenerational thinking.

The United Nations estimates and projections of the world’s population, produced since 1951, and typically revised every two years, can help us to place long-term analysis and thinking at the heart of national planning and the multilateral system.

This presentation illustrates the relevance of these global population estimates and projections. It give a forward-looking perspective for the benefit of future generations, including the various scenarios depicting alternative tracks of possible future trends.

[SLIDE 1]

Title/start of PPT presentation

[SLIDE 2]

- The global population reached a milestone in November 2022, when it surpassed 8 billion. This reflects humanity’s success in improving health conditions and raising survival rates.
- World population is expected to continue growing, but at a decelerating rate. The world is expected to reach 9 billion people by the late 2030s, and 10 billion sometime in the late 2050s. It could peak sometime in the 2080s, before stabilizing or beginning a slow decline.
- We know that the longer the time horizon of a projection, the larger is its uncertainty. The range of this uncertainty is indicated in the chart by the dotted lines.

[SLIDE 3]

- The regional distribution of the world’s population will continue to change over the next few decades.
- Whereas the region of Eastern and South-Eastern Asia accounts for the most inhabitants today, Central and Southern Asia are projected to become the most populous regions in the next few decades.
- By around 2070, sub-Saharan Africa is projected to host the largest population.
- Most regions will likely experience some amount of population decline before the end of the century.

[SLIDE 4]

- The number of persons aged 60 or over is projected to almost double by mid-century, rising from 1.1 billion people in 2023 to around 2.1 billion in 2050.

[SLIDE 5]

- There are both similarities and differences in the evolution of the population age distribution by region. The distribution of the population by age has important consequences for government policy.
- First, a similarity: all regions will face a decline in the share of young persons in the coming decades. However, the proportion of young people (depicted in blue) will vary greatly, with sub-Saharan Africa maintaining by far the youngest population.
- Second, another similarity: all regions will experience an increase in the share of older persons (depicted in grey). The share of older persons in the total population will be the highest in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and in Europe and Northern America.
- Third, the share of population in the working ages (depicted in orange) is expected to increase in some regions but to decrease in others. When the share of the working-age population increases, countries may benefit from faster per capita economic growth, also known as the demographic dividend. This demographic window of opportunity will remain open in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa over the coming decades.

[SLIDE 6]

- The global average number of births per woman reached 2.3 in 2021, down from more than 5 births per woman in the early 1960s.
- However, some regions continue to face challenges related to high fertility. In sub-Saharan Africa, the average number of births per woman is currently 4.5, or more than twice the global average.
- The relatively high level of fertility and the resulting rapid growth of the population present a major challenge for ending poverty in sub-Saharan Africa and achieving the SDGs by 2030. However, if fertility continues to decline, it brings the potential for an accelerated growth of GDP per capita as the working-age population increases as a proportion of the total. This situation serves as a reminder that further investments are needed to improve access to health care, in particular for reproductive health care.

[SLIDE 7]

The drivers of population change differ sharply between the more developed and the less developed regions. These differences have important implications for government policy. In this chart, the change in the size of the population is depicted by the blue bars.

- In **the more developed regions**, since 2000, international migration (depicted by the yellow line) contributes more to population growth than does the balance of births over deaths (depicted by the green line).
- Over the next few decades, as the number of deaths progressively exceeds the number of births, a positive net inflow of migrants is expected to become the sole driver of population increase in the more developed regions, assuming a continuation of recent patterns and levels of migration. From mid-century onward, even with a continuing inflow of migrants, these regions are expected to experience population decline due to the increasing excess of deaths over births.
- In **the less developed regions**, total population change is driven almost exclusively by an excess of births over deaths, and this will likely continue to be the case over the next few decades. For these regions, international migration will not play a major role in overall population change.

- These two charts reflect regional averages. Within each group, country experiences may vary significantly. For instance, some countries in the global North will continue to experience population growth, driven mainly by immigration, whereas some countries in the global South may soon experience population decline, possibly driven by a combination of low fertility and out-migration.

[SLIDE 8]

- Even though global birth rates are falling, the absolute number of births will likely continue to increase over the next several decades due to the continuing growth in the number of women of reproductive age.
- In fact, it is expected that fully two thirds of the increase in global population between 2020 and 2050 will be driven by the momentum of past growth. High fertility and declining mortality will contribute around one third of the expected global growth over this period.
- Nevertheless, further reductions in the fertility level will have important consequences for population growth in the second half of the century, as the impact of fertility on population size cumulates from one generation to the next.
- Thus, most of the increase in global population over the next several decades is largely inevitable. However, this fact should not make us fatalistic. On the contrary, it should serve as a reminder that our actions today will have consequences for decades to come.

[SLIDE 9]

- Throughout history, populations have encountered and recovered from various crises. Crises often create temporary ruptures or discontinuities in long-term trends. Crises are reflected in trends of demographic indicators, which typically return to pre-crisis levels and trends.
- (CLICK) One example of a prolonged crisis is the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa. Until the mid-1980s, life expectancy at birth was increasing significantly in the subregion.
- (CLICK) With the HIV/AIDS epidemics, 10 years of life expectancy were lost over the course of 15 years. Life expectancy at birth for the region was down to 53 years in 2005.
- (CLICK) Thanks to the development and availability of treatment, as well as information and prevention campaigns, the negative trend was reversed, and life expectancy for Southern Africa resumed its upward trajectory, eventually regaining and then surpassing the level achieved before the crisis.

[SLIDE 10]

- (CLICK) COVID-19 reduced life expectancy in many countries. In the United States, for example, life expectancy at birth declined by more than 2 years between 2019 and 2021.
- (CLICK) We expect that life expectancy will rebound to its pre-COVID level and continue to increase, resuming the pre-pandemic trend.

[SLIDE 11]

- In conclusion, let me present five key take-away messages concerning the potential impact of demographic trends on future generations:
 1. For the next 30 years, the size, composition and distribution of the global population can be predicted with relatively high confidence.

2. The choices we make today will have important consequences for future population levels and trends.
3. In high fertility settings, a sustained drop in fertility will allow for increased investments per child in health care and education and create a time-bound opportunity for accelerated economic growth per person -- the so-called “demographic dividend”.
4. In low fertility settings, Governments should anticipate a larger share of older persons in their future populations and consider policies and programmes to facilitate work-life balance and to support well-managed migration.
5. Government policies related to fertility should empower individuals and couples to decide, freely and responsibly, the number and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so.