

NAVIGATING MEGATRENDS: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future



Demographic Change and Sustainability

Two thirds of the human population now lives in a country with fertility below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman

In mid-2024, UNFPA issued five think pieces to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the landmark 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Under the framing of *Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future*, the five think pieces are titled:

- ▶ **Demographic Change and Sustainability**
- ▶ The Future of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- ▶ The Future of Population Data
- ▶ ICPD and Climate Action
- ▶ A Safe Digital Future

The think pieces explore ways to sustain, refresh and accelerate ICPD commitments in a world of radical transformation. Designed for development actors and policymakers, they reflect on progress and highlight likely future scenarios. They offer starting points for discussion on what's next for population, development and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

This brief offers starting points for discussion on what's next for population, development and sexual and reproductive health and rights

This short summary highlights key findings and recommended actions from the think piece on demographic change and sustainability. It suggests how leaders can harness population dynamics to accelerate sustainable development.

Introduction

The pace and direction of demographic change have never been so different between countries. While the median age in Europe is approximately 40, it is closer to 17 in West Africa. High fertility and rapid population growth continue in much of West, Central and East Africa. Yet two thirds of the human population now lives in a country with fertility below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. Very low fertility is concentrated in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe and East Asia.

Some countries are concerned about rapid population growth. Others worry about population decline. Some contend that they have "too many" immigrants. Others fear the consequences of rapid emigration, particularly of their most educated, the so called "brain drain". Having "too many" younger or older people is considered an existential crisis and may trigger fears for the future of health and social services, pensions, urban development, economic growth and even national security.

In response to anxieties about demographic change, governments sometimes seek “demographic solutions”. These typically push back against the rights and values embodied in the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Policies may incentivize higher or lower fertility rates in ways that deny individual choices. They may restrict access to contraceptive services, or promote pronatalist payments, or restrict migration. Such approaches rarely succeed, as they often fail to address the underlying social and economic causes of demographic change, while distracting leaders from the needed actions to adequately prepare for their demographic future.

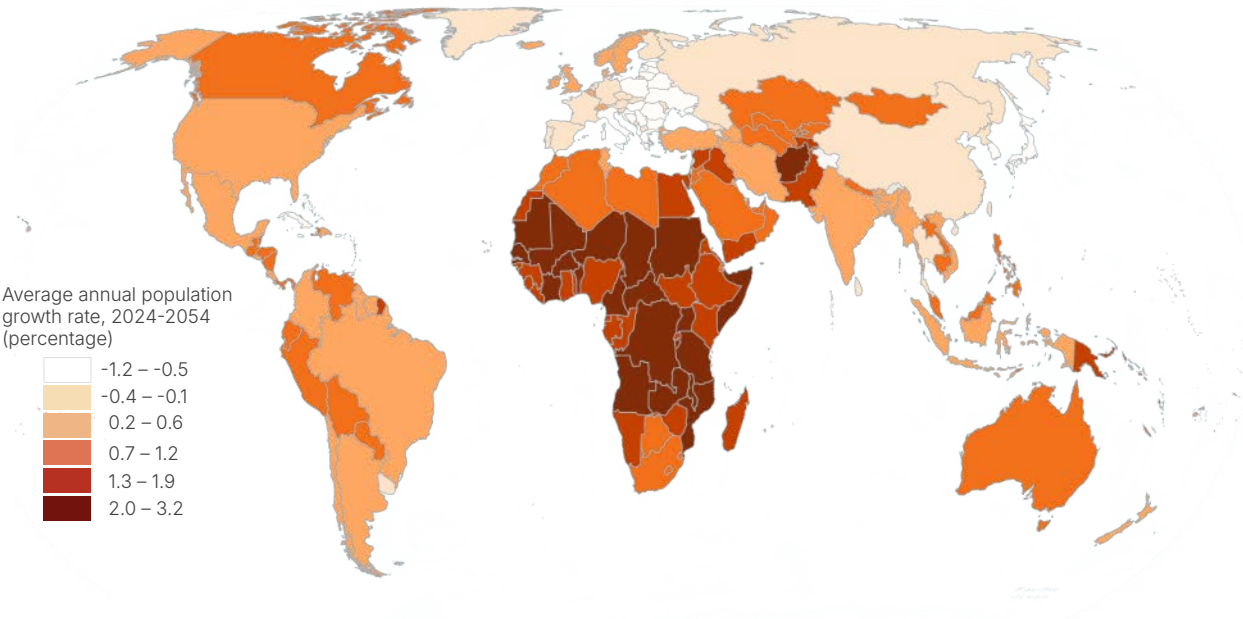
Key insights

Both high- and low-fertility countries have gaps between the number of children born and the number “desired” by people having children. Wherever this occurs, it signals a clear need to accelerate measures to realize women’s rights to reproductive decision-making and bodily autonomy, and to assure reproductive rights and choices. This may require investment to provide universal access to quality reproductive health services, including contraception and infertility services, and actions to address the many other issues that determine choices about childbearing. Examples include affordable housing, paid leave, affordable childcare, the cost of education and flexible working hours.

The care economy is growing as the demand for childcare and care for older persons rises in all regions. An upward trend is driven by projections of an additional 1 billion older persons (age 65+)

▶ **FIGURE 1**

Population growth rate, 2024-2054



Source: Adapted from World Population Prospects 2022, UNDESA Population Division

Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

by the second half of the 2050s. Women currently perform 76.2 per cent of unpaid care, 3.2 times more than men. Investing in gender-responsive care systems is a foundation for gender equality, the well-being of children and older persons, and the promotion of more demographically resilient societies.

Even at a moment of widespread demographic diversity, the general patterns of demographic change are relatively slow moving and predictable, outside migration. Certain features of the future can already be predicted, barring unforeseen crises:

- ▶ Global population growth will continue albeit at a decreasing rate over the next four decades at least (see Figure 1).
- ▶ Continued population growth in Africa and South Asia will increase the relative proportion of young persons in these regions. Their decision-making, education, health, rights and economic opportunities will be pivotal to national prospects for demographic dividends and to overall global development.



Demographic change affects the nature and demand for health-care services, the care economy, labour practices, education needs and social support

- ▶ High fertility rates will continue to decline while low (and very low) fertility rates will become the norm in more countries.
- ▶ As fertility declines and health and longevity continue to improve, the absolute and relative number of older persons will rise in every country.
- ▶ Urban populations will continue to grow, especially in small to medium-sized cities. It is not a question of whether countries will urbanize, but what form urbanization will take.

- ▶ Demographic change will affect the nature and demand for health-care services, as well as the care economy, labour practices, education needs and social support, requiring all governments to project and plan ahead to meet global goals and achieve sustainable development.

Migration is not easy to predict, but recent trends are notable and offer insights on the near future. Migrants are increasingly seeking to escape threats rather than to gain opportunities. The number of persons fleeing dangers is expected to rise due to climate and other humanitarian crises. As the International Organization on Migration notes, asylum seekers and refugees need legal rights not just to live but to work in host countries, as well as to pursue a realistic pathway to legal permanent residence as needed. While such reforms may be difficult politically, abundant evidence indicates that such reforms can ultimately benefit immigrants and citizens alike, and create a stronger and more resilient economic and social order for all.



Migrants are increasingly seeking to escape threats rather than to gain opportunities

Shrinking and ageing populations may be viewed as a threat to national welfare, health care and the economy. This has led countries in different regions down the path of pronatalist policies and rhetoric. Global and local debates have erupted over reproductive rights and choices, with significant implications for women’s freedom, bodily autonomy and agency. In new garb, these debates echo those that 30 years ago galvanized the ICPD to agree on an empowering vision of development, one centred on people and the realization of their reproductive rights and choices.

Recommended actions

Demographic change is inevitable. It can bring many opportunities if countries routinely generate and use demographic data, evidence and population projections, including at subnational levels, to plan and adapt institutions, infrastructure, policies and services. Sex-disaggregated data and analysis can guide policies that meet the varying and unique needs and realities of young men and women. These will vary by country, but sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality, quality education and decent work are essential to all. See the related ICPD30 Brief on the Future of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

Sex-disaggregated data and analysis can guide policies that meet the unique needs of young men and women

Rather than imposing fertility targets, governments are encouraged to address factors that are limiting people’s opportunities to have the number of children they desire. Politics and the economy, the realization of reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, and access to care and support,



including reliable sexual and reproductive health services, all factor greatly into the capacity to avoid unplanned pregnancies and to have a desired number of children. Holistic population policies respond to local needs, assure access to both contraception and infertility services, and promote reproductive rights and choices.

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All countries are encouraged to invest in their youth. It is young people who will power productive economies, address the climate crisis throughout their lives and harness the tech revolution. While the benefits of investment in young people are universal, they are especially urgent for countries with large numbers of adolescents and youth and those losing young people to out-migration.

Countries can and should prepare for older populations. Active and healthy ageing does not start with the actions people take when they turn 60, but is fundamentally shaped by investment in people's health from their earliest years and throughout their lives. This includes but goes beyond reforms of pension systems, health

insurance and the health-care system. While promoting labour market engagement for older persons, governments should also encourage labour force participation among women, migrants, the un- and underemployed, and those with disabilities, and ensure an enabling environment that promotes living wages. More policy exchanges across countries at different stages of ageing can be a good platform for sharing the most promising policies.

Strengthening the care economy is critical for healthy ageing. This should take place alongside urban and residential planning and housing policies that safely maintain the independence of older persons in "age-friendly" communities. Planning for an ageing society ideally happens well in advance. Even countries with large shares of young people could start preparing for having more older persons.

Increased investment in the care economy and gender-responsive family policies recognizes that everyone benefits from universal support for the care of children and older persons. Care should not depend mainly on the unpaid work of female family members. All care workers should have fair pay and decent working conditions. To enable families to have the children they desire, governments are encouraged to invest in high-quality and affordable childcare, aligned with the working hours of parents.

Countries can seize the opportunity to "get urban development right". Significant experience has accumulated on how to design liveable, vibrant, human-centric cities. Governments should adopt designs that improve health outcomes, promote community life, protect the security of diverse populations, reduce carbon footprints, ensure equitable access to land and credit for women, reduce urban heat island effects and are affordable for young people.

Significant experience has accumulated on how to design liveable, vibrant, human-centric cities


International migration is a reality in a globalized world and will likely increase due to climate and humanitarian crises, and economic inequalities. All governments are encouraged to sign the UN 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and realize its objectives. Political leaders in recipient countries should consider shifting from restrictive immigration stances to policies that secure safe, orderly and regular migration. They should take steps to integrate migrants humanely, with no discrimination, and regardless of their origin and status.

Conclusion

In highlighting key findings and recommended actions on demographic diversity and resilience, this brief has shown that fertility targets and incentives are blunt instruments, and governments can best support families if they focus on mitigating the factors that limit people's choices to have the number of children they desire, invest in human capital and prepare for their demographic future.

For healthy ageing and a family-friendly society, there is a widespread need to strengthen the care economy, recognizing that everyone benefits when there is support for the care of children and older persons, and this important work cannot rely on women's unpaid labour.

Finally, international migration is inevitable in a globalized world and there is a high likelihood that it will increase in the coming years due to climate and humanitarian crises and economic inequality. Demographic diversity offers countries an opportunity to reconsider the potential of safe and orderly international migration as a pathway to sustainable development.



Fertility targets and incentives are blunt instruments, and governments can better support families if they focus on mitigating the factors that limit people's choices to have the number of children they desire

ENDNOTES

1 The demographic dividend is the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population (14 and younger, and 65 and older). Source: [UNFPA website](#).

Acknowledgements

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How to cite this publication: United Nations Population Fund (2024).
Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future
ICPD30 Brief: Demographic Change and Sustainability

April 2024

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entities they represent.

Cover photo © UNFPA

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