

World Population Prospects, the 2015 Revision. UNDESA Population Division

Summary of Key Findings

In these projections, the UNDESA raised its future population growth estimates from those predicted in 2012. World population, which stood at 7.3 billion in 2015, is now expected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050 and 11.2 billion by 2100. Yet even these projected figures are only the medium UNDESA estimate, which is contingent on significant reductions to fertility rates over the next 85 years. Meanwhile, the Revision suggests that world population, particularly in developed countries, is ageing at an unprecedented rate, with serious implications for public services in the most affected countries. The necessity of providing adequate family planning services to women and couples in less developed countries is also emphasised in the report. This briefing will cover in greater detail the UNDESA's forecast for population growth, fertility and ageing until 2100. It will also contain Population Matters' view of the implications of the report.

Worldwide Population Growth

Currently, the world population is growing at a rate of 1.18 per cent per year: an annual addition of 83 million people. While this growth rate has slowed slightly over the last decade from an annual growth rate of 1.24 per cent in 2005, it is highly unlikely to slow sufficiently for the world population to stabilise before 2100. UNDESA asserts "with a 95 per cent degree of confidence" that global population will have risen to between 8.4 and 8.6 billion by 2030, and between 9.5 and 13.3 billion by 2100.

Regional Population Growth

Africa is predicted to have the highest growth rate; up to half of all population growth between 2015 and 2030 is expected to occur in this region. As such, Africa is expected to grow by approximately 1.3 billion people, while Asia, which is likely to be the second highest contributor to future population growth, will grow by around 0.9 billion people over the same period. Other regions will experience growth on a much smaller scale – or even shrinkage –. As a result, Africa's share of global population is expected to reach 25 per cent by 2050 and almost 40 per cent by 2100.

Those countries that significantly affect the overall trend of world population are likely to be few in number. India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, United Republic of Tanzania, United States of America, Indonesia and Uganda are expected to contribute half of the world population growth 2015-2050. Meanwhile, 48 countries are set to experience a considerable decrease in their population size over the next 35 years; for several developed countries, including Hungary, Latvia and Japan, that decrease could reach up to 15 per cent by 2050. Overall, the population of Europe is set to fall considerably. However, since 33 countries, most of them LDCs, are set to experience population increases of up to 300 per cent before the turn of the century, this decrease will scarcely affect the steady onward march of world population growth.

Meanwhile, the implementation of family planning policies by certain governments will result in changes to the rankings of the most populous countries in the world. India's population is expected to exceed China's within seven years, meaning that India will become the world's most populous country. By 2022, both India and China are expected to have populations of around 1.4 billion; thereafter, India's will

continue to grow while China's will stabilise and eventually, perhaps after 2030, begin to decline. Elsewhere, a further four countries are expected to exceed 300 million inhabitants by 2050: Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan and the United States. Nigeria's population is expected to have overtaken that of the US by that time.

Fertility

Global fertility is projected to fall from 2.5 children per woman 2010-2015 to 2.0 2095-2100, with even the least developed countries (LDCs) set to experience steep reductions; an average fertility rate of 4.3 2010-2015 is expected to fall to just 2.1 by 2095-2100. "Low-fertility" countries, where the average fertility rate is below the "replacement level" of 2.1 births, are now estimated to account for 46 per cent of states worldwide. Meanwhile, a further 46 per cent of states, including a large number of Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, are said to have "intermediate fertility", signifying an average birth rate of between 2 and 5 births per woman. Of the 9 per cent of countries that are classified as "high-fertility", meaning the average woman has more than 5 births in her lifetime, only two are not found in Africa. These "high-fertility" countries are also thought to have the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy and childbirth; in certain regions of Africa, this rate can reach up to 98 per 1000 young women, according to the report.

UNDESA's medium estimate of future population growth, which predicts a world population of 11.2 billion by 2100, is contingent on rapidly falling fertility rates. Should global fertility rates in actuality amount to 0.5 children per woman higher than UNDESA's medium predictions, world population will likely surpass 16 billion by 2100. In order to ensure this does not occur, measures must be taken

to ensure safe, modern family planning methods are available to all women across the globe; 22 per cent of adult women in LDCs, the report claims, currently have an "unmet need for family planning" i.e. they wish to avoid or postpone pregnancy but are not using modern contraception.

Increasing Longevity

Between 2015 and 2100, average life expectancy worldwide is projected to rise from 70 to 83 years. Africa is projected to gain about 19 years of life expectancy on average during this period, while Europe may gain about 10 years. As a result, the average Briton, for example, may have a life expectancy at birth of 92 years by 2100. According to the report, these developments are predominantly contingent on scientific advancements to combat infectious diseases, particularly those, such as HIV, that are sexually transmitted. Hence the particularly steep projected increase in life expectancy in Africa, whose current average life expectancy of 60 years is reduced by AIDS fatalities.

The proportion of the world population aged 60 or over is now the fastest growing age group, according to the report. At a growth rate of 3.26 per cent per year, this age group will soon comprise over a quarter of the population of every region except for Africa. Overall, the number of older persons in the world is projected to rise from 901 million to 1.4 billion by 2030, 2.1 billion by 2050, and 3.2 billion in 2100. This development will inevitably have considerable economic implications for the nations that are the most affected; the Potential Support Ratio (PSR), or the number of workers per retiree, is set to fall below 2 in at least 35 countries by 2050. Currently, Japan has the lowest PSR in the world at 2.1, though this is liable to change in the near future, since many European countries now also have rapidly ageing populations. Either

way, the report asserts, considerable pressure awaits the healthcare and social protection systems of many developed countries “in the not-too-distant future”.

International Migration

For those countries that are net receivers of international migrants, the contribution of these movements to national population growth is predicted to increase over the remainder of this century. Between 2015 and 2050, total births in high-income countries are projected to exceed deaths by 20 million, while the net gain in migrants is projected to be 91 million; migration, therefore, is set to account for 82 per cent of population growth in high-income countries in this period. This will work to offset the declining PSRs, explained above, with which many of these countries will be struggling by this time. While international migration between countries of the Global South remains significant, the countries projected to receive the greatest number of international migrants between 2015 and 2050 – more than 100,000 migrants per country – are all high-income countries: the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, the Russian Federation and Italy.

Potential Demographic Dividend

A ‘demographic dividend’ is defined by the United Nations Population Fund as “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)”¹. Such a shift holds great benefits for developing countries in particular. It is these countries, furthermore, that are set to profit from a demographic dividend over the remainder of this century. Projected declines in fertility rates as described above, combined with the high proportion of children in the populations of Africa, Latin America and Asia today, suggest that the size of the labour force in these countries will greatly outstrip the number of dependents in years to come.

Implications of the UNDESA’s Findings

Rapidly growing and ageing populations will have serious consequences both within and outside of our own country. In the UK, the primary concern must be whether or not the NHS is sufficiently robust to withstand the pressure of so many more patients in the future. Recent figures indicate that this is not the case; last winter, Accident and Emergency departments across the country missed their waiting time targets by 11 per cent, while waiting times for cancer treatments are expected to reach their highest average for seven years during 2015². In the midst of a funding crisis that could lead to a deficit of £30 billion by 2020³, the NHS is in no position to take on the exponentially rising costs that a growing, ageing UK population will inevitably entail.

At the same time, population growth in the UK will bring further pressure to bear on the housing crisis in this country. The current demand for new housing, estimated at 240,000 new homes every

¹ <http://www.unfpa.org/demographic-dividend>

² http://www.populationmatters.org/documents/population_health.pdf

³ Ibid.

year⁴, will inevitably increase in step with population growth. The fact that the current demand is not being met by any means – only 120,000 new houses were constructed in 2014⁵ – should therefore be a cause for concern.

Increases to the world population, meanwhile, will exacerbate the effects of climate change as the demand for basic resources increases. Biodiversity will be negatively impacted, in particular, by the combination of ocean acidification and the clearing of natural habitats to make space to raise greater quantities of livestock and crops⁶. These are two developments that are directly linked to human consumption, which will inevitably increase as the world population expands. Food production, in particular, will have to increase considerably – by up to 70 per cent by 2050, according to certain estimates – in order to keep pace with world population growth⁷. This development has the potential to accelerate the process of global warming, with disastrous consequences for global biodiversity and climate.

However, the impact of the predicted population increases is likely to be felt most strongly by the people of the developing countries that will experience the greatest changes to their population size. While medical advancements to combat infectious diseases, predicted with confidence by the UNDESA report, will entail significant improvements to the quality of life in these countries, growing populations will strain the infrastructure and resources available to the people. This will necessitate greater quantities of

aid from developed countries, which these countries, Britain included, must be prepared to provide in order to avert a humanitarian disaster. Aside from this, greater focus must be placed on improving access to modern family planning methods, so that women and couples in developing countries may choose their family size without societal or medical constraints. This, it is hoped, will lessen the blow that the population figures predicted by the UNDESA would otherwise inflict upon the development and quality of life in the Global South.

⁴http://www.populationmatters.org/documents/housing_population.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶<http://www.globalissues.org/article/172/climate-change-affects-biodiversity>

⁷http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/docs/expert_paper/How_to_Feed_the_World_in_2050.pdf