

»» Megatrend demography: challenges of a growing global population

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The continued growth of the global population is one of the megatrends of our era. Although the population growth rate has been falling sharply since the 1970s (from 2.0% to currently around 1.2% p.a.), as long as the rate is positive, the world's population continues to grow. Today, nobody can quantify exactly how much the rate will continue to grow. Depending on assumptions about the development of life expectancy and the birth rate, estimates for the year 2300 vary between a significant decline to 2.3 billion and a leap to 36 billion people.

Yet as the influencing factors change at a relatively slow pace, today's estimates suggest that there will be between 8.7 and 10.8 billion people in 2050. That is on average roughly one third more than today's population (2015: 7.3 billion). However, as demographic trends vary strongly from region to region around the world, there will be considerable regional shifts and changes in the age structure even up to 2050. Understanding these change processes is vital to establishing a long-term development policy and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Africa growing fastest by far

Globally speaking, the birth rate has halved from the 1960s, from about 5 children per woman to just 2.5. While Europe, Asia and Latin America have particularly contributed to this development, the rate in Africa has barely dropped (2015: 4.7). This means that roughly one half of the global population growth by 2050 will take place on the African continent (rising from 1.17 to 2.47 billion). Yet other populous countries outside of Africa are contributing to this growth as well, first and foremost India, whose population rises by more than 11 million every year, and will most likely supplant China as the most populous country in the world by 2022.

Global rise in populations' average age

Lower birth rates in many regions and rising life expectancy are factors pushing up the ratio of elderly people in the population. According to UN forecasts, the number of people over the age of 60 will double by 2050. One third of people will be over 60 in Europe, and one quarter will be that age in Asia and Latin America. Even in Africa, the share of older people is set to rise from 5% to 9%. The average age of the world's population will rise from 30 (2015) to 36 years (2050). The average age in the least developed countries will rise from 20 (2015) to 26 years (2050).

Challenges for sustainable global development

Demographic changes are posing huge challenges for the global community, given that our planet's boundaries cannot be extended at finitum.

- *Food security:* the potential of land to be used for farming purposes is limited around the world. Alongside more space, what is needed above all is significant rises in efficiency and productivity in food production without jeopardising biodiversity and health.
- *CO₂ emissions:* global CO₂ emissions are already too high to avoid dramatic changes to our climate. As the global population continues to grow, the per capita output of CO₂ needs to be scaled back drastically. This requires a global change in production and consumption patterns.
- *Infrastructure requirements:* in order to safeguard SDG-compliant basic services for a growing population, enormous investments are required in constructing schools, hospitals, drinking water facilities, roads and residential buildings. A large part of the additional needs will emerge in cities due to the parallel advances in urbanisation.

- *Productive employment:* global population growth increases labour supply, particularly in countries with already high levels of unemployment and underemployment, thus increasingly threatening social peace. Creating productive employment opportunities generates a chance to convert the demographic bonus into economic development. Controlled international migration into countries with rising labour shortages can alleviate pressure.

- *Social security:* the rising age profile of the population but also the growing risks of unemployment and external shocks (financial crises, droughts, etc.) necessitate the restructuring and expansion of social security systems. This can help to reduce the risk of impoverishment on the one hand and also mitigate the potential for conflict stemming from growing inequalities on the other.

Approaches for international development cooperation

Development cooperation focused on global sustainability has to support fast-growing countries in managing their population expansion. Avoiding unplanned pregnancies with family planning, promoting education and the employment of women, as well as devising alternative ways to provide for one's old age, have proven particularly effective in this context. Moreover, it is also vital to address the aforementioned challenges appropriately, given that the global population is set to keep rising for the foreseeable future. The action required differs significantly depending on the country, whether the population is growing fast or shrinking.■