

Population Aging is the New Global Reality; Planning for it is an Imperative

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By Diene Keita

The global population is estimated at 8 billion. The sheer momentum of population increase means that we are likely to reach 10 billion people before plateauing sometime in the 2080s. The diversity of worldwide population trends, however, tells the true human story of the 8 billion milestone. While eight countries in Africa and Asia will account for 50 percent of all global population growth from now to 2050, more than 60 percent of the world population now lives in countries with below-replacement fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman. And the trend before us is one of progressive population aging all over the world. Falling fertility rates, improved health, and rising life expectancies mean that people are living longer, including in the developing world.

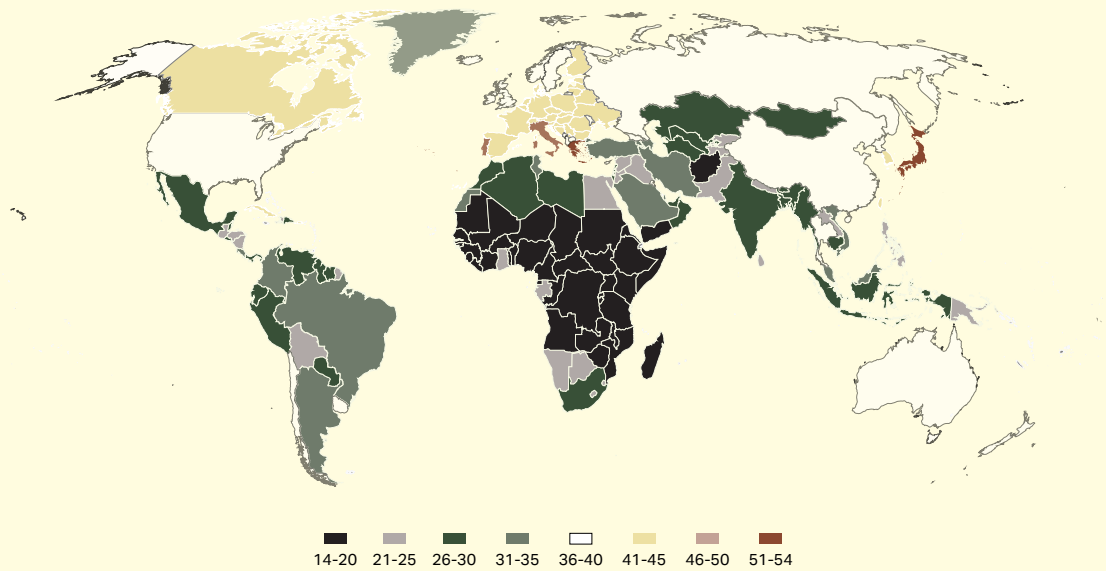
While the process of population aging, as measured by the share of older persons in the total population, is most advanced in developed countries, the rate of population aging, as measured by the increase in the number of older persons, is most rapid in the developing world. Associated with this is a rapid increase in the median age of the population as shown by the maps below. For these reasons it would be misguided to view population aging solely or predominantly as an issue of the developed world; it also has profound implications for developing countries. Failing to plan for aging — by adjusting social systems, social policies, service delivery, labor market policies, and infrastructure — would be a consequential omission that will haunt societies and economies when population aging becomes more pronounced.

Thus, even against the background of a continued growth of the world population, we see a new direction in demographic change. The populations in all countries are getting older, and in some countries the populations have already begun to shrink. Population aging represents an amazing human achievement, but in some countries the trends have tipped toward population decline. According to the latest UN data from 2022, more than 50 countries already have declining populations.

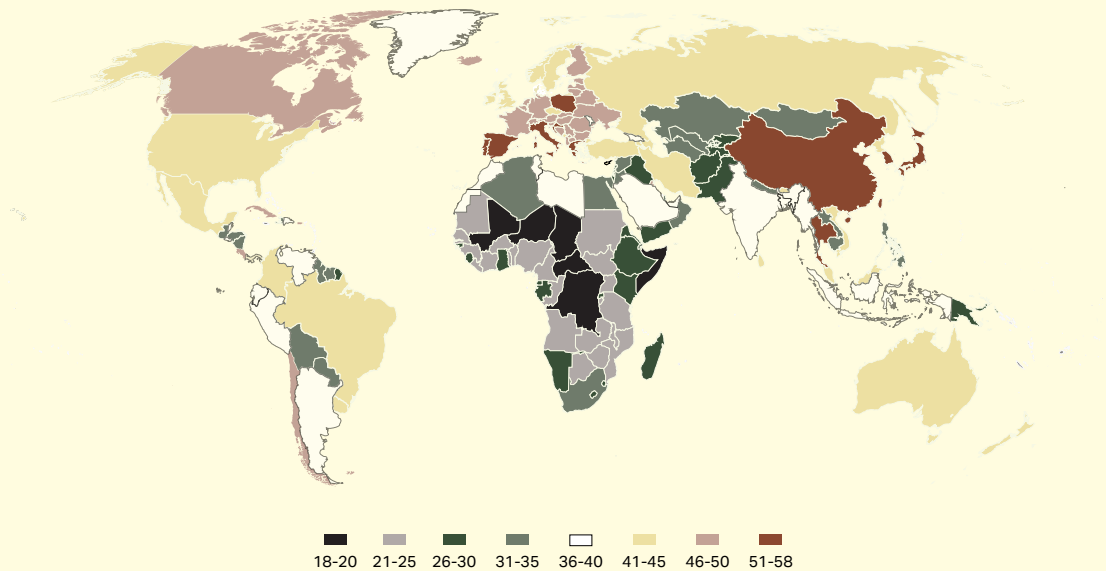
In many countries these relatively new demographic developments are causing major concerns. As a result, in recent years UNFPA has received a growing number of requests to help countries prepare for demographic change. In response, UNFPA has significantly increased our focus on aging and low fertility and on policy support to help governments build societies that are resilient to, and can thrive amid, demographic change. This includes the strengthening of social systems, service delivery, and infrastructure so that they are appropriate for demographic futures, as well as the development of human capital and more inclusive societies that can help countries make the most of demographic changes. No single policy response can build demographic resilience in all countries, but key principles are common to all:

- First and foremost, demographic resilience requires demographic intelligence, and UNFPA supports countries to generate the high-quality population data needed to anticipate the future, plan for coming population needs, and promote prosperity. Countries must adjust their social systems and infrastructure for future demographic realities, including an older population and possibly a shrinking population.
- Countries must actively counter populist rhetoric, which pitches the young against the old, the local against the foreign, and majorities against minorities. A key to demographic resilience is strengthening human capabilities and ensuring inclusive societies where all people can actively contribute to development.
- An inherently negative, reactive, and fragmented response to demographic issues such as population aging must give way to a fundamentally positive, anticipatory, and integrated response.

Median Age of Population by Country, 2022



Median Age of Population by Country, 2050



SOURCE: ESTIMATES, BASED ON UN, WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS, 2022 REVISION.

It is important to recognize that active and healthy aging does not magically start at age 60 but is the result of how we lived throughout life. Countries must not only expand and improve geriatric care but must also pay greater attention to lifelong health.

To understand and realize these opportunities, countries will need to pursue a much more comprehensive approach to aging. This goes well beyond quick fixes of social systems such as pensions and health care that threaten to break down and requires a look at the social systems as a whole. To this end, it is not enough to focus only on the financial bottom line of the social systems and social policies but also on their ultimate objectives to eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that active and healthy aging does not magically start at age 60 but is the result of how we lived throughout life. Countries must not only expand and improve geriatric care but must also pay greater attention to lifelong health. How we age starts even before birth with pregnancy. It is shaped by maternal, newborn, and child health; it includes sexual and reproductive health care; and it is affected by healthy habits throughout life. Finally, lifelong learning and investments in human capital throughout the life course can promote technological progress and increased productivity and can even help countries to realize a second demographic dividend with population aging.

Many surveys in developing countries, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, do not collect data on people over age 49, leaving censuses, which are normally undertaken only once every 10 years, as the main source of data on the living conditions of older persons. As the world's largest supporter of censuses, UNFPA is encouraging governments to use census data to assess the living conditions of older persons and promote the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing. UNFPA's Population Data Portal, launched in 2022, includes a dashboard showing the living vulnerabilities of older persons to COVID-19, and we need more such tools for illustrating the realities of life for older populations (<https://pdp.unfpa.org/>). In addition to censuses and surveys, the civil registration of vital statistics (CRVS) is important for better population data. As the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems, UNFPA continues to strive for improvements in the collection of essential population data and as the world's largest supporter of national transfer accounts. National transfer accounts offer the most rigorous way to examine the links between demographic change — notably

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changes in the number and age structure of the population — and the economy and to assess, for example, emanating pressures on public and private finances.

UNFPA stands ready to support countries as they anticipate and assess population aging and develop evidence- and rights-based responses. UNFPA does so through its global and regional programs on aging, low fertility, and demographic resilience. ●

To learn more about UNFPA and its work on population aging around the world, please contact Ms. Florence Bauer, regional director, Eastern Europe and Central Asia (fbauer@unfpa.org); Dr. Rachel Snow, chief of Population and Development Branch (rsnow@unfpa.org); or Mr. Michael Herrmann, senior advisor on Economics and Demography (herrmann@unfpa.org).



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