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World demographic trends

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, prepared in accordance with resolution 1996/2 of the Economic and Social Council, provides an overview of demographic trends for the world, its regions and selected countries. The report documents four demographic megatrends – population growth, population ageing, urbanization and international migration – which are highly relevant to the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It focuses on recent demographic changes, as well as projected trends over the next few decades.

In 2019, the world's population numbered 7.7 billion. Projections of future trends suggest that the world's population is likely to continue growing in future decades, but at a progressively slower pace. Globally, growth could stabilize at a level of roughly 10.9 billion people by the end of the century. As growth in its size continues, the global population will continue its gradual shift towards a growing proportion of older persons (population ageing) and living in cities (urbanization), while maintaining or further increasing current levels of cross-border mobility (international migration).

Ending poverty and hunger, reducing inequality and ensuring a healthy and productive future for all are key challenges on the path towards sustainable development. The human population continues to grow rapidly, especially in countries facing the greatest challenges in achieving the global development goals and ensuring that no one is left behind. In countries with large and growing youth populations, creating enough decent jobs and ensuring sustained and inclusive economic growth will remain top priorities. Investments in education and health care, including for reproductive health and family planning, help both to raise levels of human development and to promote a lower birth rate, two preconditions for realizing a “demographic dividend”.

* E/CN.9/2020/1.



The continuing growth of both the human population and per capita consumption underlines the importance of ensuring sustainable patterns of consumption and production, while also meeting the basic and immediate needs of a growing population, including access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food for all. More broadly, since population patterns and trends interact in multiple and critical ways with all aspects of sustainable development, a fuller integration of population dynamics into development planning and review processes will assist countries in achieving the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

I. Introduction

1. The present report documents four demographic megatrends – population growth, population ageing, urbanization and international migration – which are highly relevant to the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. While the four megatrends apply to the world’s population as a whole, there is a considerable diversity of demographic patterns and trends across countries and regions, and across development and income groups, depending especially on levels and trends in birth rates.

2. In 2019, the world’s population numbered 7.7 billion and was projected to grow to around 8.5 billion in 2030. Most of the growth between 2019 and 2030 is expected to occur in sub-Saharan Africa and in Central and Southern Asia, where the population will increase by around 0.3 billion and 0.2 billion, respectively. A population of 9.7 billion is projected for 2050. Globally, growth could stabilize at a level of roughly 10.9 billion people by the end of the century. Although a gradual slowdown in the global rate of increase is anticipated, rapid population growth continues at present, especially in countries facing the greatest challenges in achieving the global development goals and ensuring that no one is left behind. The continuing growth of both the human population and per capita consumption underlines the importance of ensuring sustainable patterns of consumption and production, while also meeting the basic and immediate needs of a growing population, including access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food for all.

3. Population ageing is a worldwide phenomenon driven by declining birth rates and, to a lesser extent, by increasing longevity. Some countries are still in an early phase of the demographic transition, with relatively high levels of fertility and large proportions of children and youth, while in other countries the number of older persons has grown rapidly, shifting the balance of the population from younger to older age groups. The changing age structure of the human population has major implications in the short run for labour market dynamics and in the long run for the financial sustainability of social security, health-care and pension systems. In the intermediate stages of the demographic transition, when rates of both mortality and fertility are declining, a rising share of the working-age population has the potential to generate a “demographic dividend”, which depends also on prior investments in education and health. At more advanced stages of population ageing, the reduced share of the population in the working age range puts pressure on support systems for the older population (see [E/CN.9/2017/2](#)).

4. Urbanization is an important driver of economic growth and human development. Cities concentrate economic activities and innovations, and they provide infrastructure and social services beyond the urban areas themselves. More than half of the world’s people live in urban areas, and projections indicate that all of the anticipated growth of the human population between now and 2050 will be accounted for by the growth of the population residing in urban areas. In many regions, the share of the population living in cities, as well as the number and size of cities, will continue to grow, driven by a combination of factors, including a surplus of births relative to deaths occurring in urban areas, migration from rural to urban areas of the same country, urban reclassification of formerly rural areas and migration from other countries. Many cities attract considerable numbers of international migrants and play an important role in their integration into the host society. Population growth and urbanization are also transforming the lives of those living in the rural areas around cities. The linkages between cities and rural areas are instrumental, for example, in shaping sustainable food systems for a growing global population (see [E/CN.9/2018/2](#)).

5. International migration continues to increase globally and to affect the demographics and other characteristics of origin and destination countries. Since migration is selective in terms of age, sex, level of education and other factors, it can also affect trends in employment and other aspects of sustainable development. In countries with ageing populations and an excess of deaths over births, international migration can have a significant impact on the working-age population and economic growth. The multiple impacts of international migration are of major importance for the development of countries of origin, transit and destination and require adequate policy responses so that migrants can make better lives for themselves and their families, while also contributing to the economic and social development of both host societies and, potentially, communities of origin (see [E/CN.9/2018/2](#)).

6. The demographic trends highlighted in the present report are provided for the world, for major geographical regions,¹ and for development and income groups. The report is based mainly on data contained in *World Population Prospects 2019*, the twenty-sixth edition of the United Nations estimates and projections of global population, prepared every two years by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The report also draws on other data sets created and maintained by the Population Division. Data on urbanization and on the size and growth of cities are from *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*. Data on the number and characteristics of international migrants, including refugees, are from the International Migrant Stock 2019 data set. Data about contraceptive use and the unmet need for family planning are from the World Contraceptive Use 2019 and Estimates and Projections of Family Planning Indicators 2019 data sets.

II. Population growth

7. In 2019, the world's population reached an estimated 7.7 billion, and it is expected to grow to about 10.9 billion in 2100 (see table 1). Currently, the global population is growing at 1.1 per cent per year and thus increased by some 82 million people in 2019. The global growth rate is expected to decline to about 0.5 per cent by 2050, driven by a continuing decline in levels of fertility. By 2100, it is expected that the growth rate of the global population will be very close to zero.

¹ In preparing the analysis for the present report, countries and areas were grouped into eight regions based on the classification being used to track progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (see <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/regional-groups/>). The eight regions are as follows: (a) sub-Saharan Africa; (b) Northern Africa and Western Asia; (c) Central and Southern Asia; (d) Eastern and South-Eastern Asia; (e) Latin America and the Caribbean; (f) Australia and New Zealand; (g) Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand; and (h) Europe and Northern America. These regional groupings are used throughout the present report with a small number of exceptions, which are clearly noted.

Table 1
World population by region, development group and income group, from 1970 to 2100

(Millions)

Region, development group or income group	Estimates			Projections ^a		
	1970	1990	2019	2030	2050	2100
World	3 700	5 327	7 713	8 548	9 735	10 875
Sub-Saharan Africa	281	491	1 066	1 400	2 118	3 775
Northern Africa and Western Asia	169	288	517	609	754	928
Central and Southern Asia	775	1 240	1 991	2 227	2 496	2 330
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	1 281	1 838	2 335	2 427	2 411	1 967
Latin America and the Caribbean	287	443	648	706	762	680
Australia and New Zealand	16	20	30	33	38	49
Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand	4	7	12	15	19	26
Europe and Northern America	888	1 001	1 114	1 132	1 136	1 120
More developed regions	1 008	1 146	1 271	1 286	1 280	1 244
Less developed regions	2 692	4 182	6 443	7 262	8 455	9 631
Least developed countries	307	506	1 033	1 314	1 877	3 047
Other less developed countries	2 385	3 675	5 409	5 949	6 578	6 584
High-income countries	881	1 038	1 258	1 299	1 324	1 304
Middle-income countries	2 607	3 936	5 697	6 253	6 933	7 082
Upper-middle-income countries	1 428	2 056	2 639	2 763	2 800	2 381
Lower-middle-income countries	1 179	1 880	3 058	3 489	4 133	4 702
Low-income countries	211	351	756	994	1 474	2 485

^a Medium variant.

8. The estimates and projections of global population by the United Nations are revised every two years, taking into account the most recent data for each country or area. The 2019 estimates of population trends in recent decades follow closely the projected trends of earlier editions. Yet all population projections have an inherent degree of uncertainty, which increases as the projection interval grows longer. To account for the uncertainty, statistical simulations were performed using a statistical model of demographic change over time, yielding a range of plausible future trends in fertility, mortality, population size and other characteristics. The median of the range of simulated future trends was taken as the most likely trajectory and is known as the “medium variant” of the official projections presented in *World Population Prospects 2019* (see figure I).

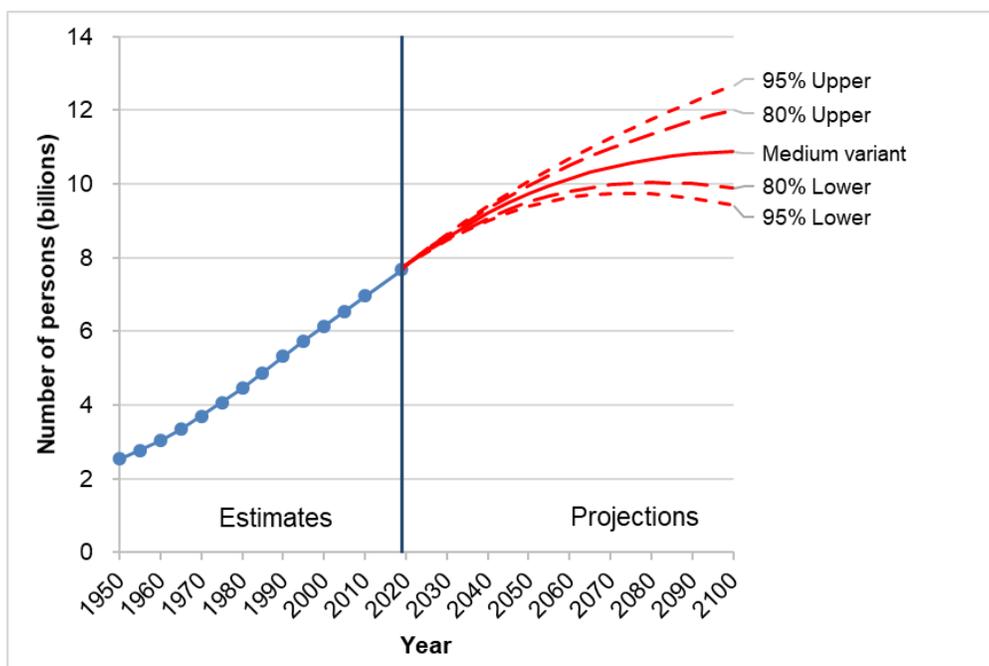
9. Derived from an analysis of past trends, the medium variant assumes a continued decline in fertility levels for countries where the number of births per woman is still relatively high. For countries and areas where fertility has fallen below two births per woman, the statistical model allows for a modest increase in the future, but only if such a trend has been confirmed by recent data. Similarly, for these projections, it is assumed that life expectancy at birth will continue to rise throughout the world, based on the observation of an ongoing and persistent reduction of mortality rates for almost all countries.²

² See <https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/> for further explanation and analysis.

10. The uncertainty of the United Nations population projections is described by prediction intervals resulting from the statistical simulation of future trends mentioned previously. The intervals indicate, with a likelihood of 95 per cent, that the global population will be between 8.5 billion and 8.6 billion in 2030, between 9.4 billion and 10.1 billion in 2050, and between 9.4 billion and 12.7 billion in 2100 (see figure I). Thus, it seems likely that the world's population will continue to grow throughout the present century. The growth will decelerate gradually over the next few decades and is expected to come to an end around 2100.

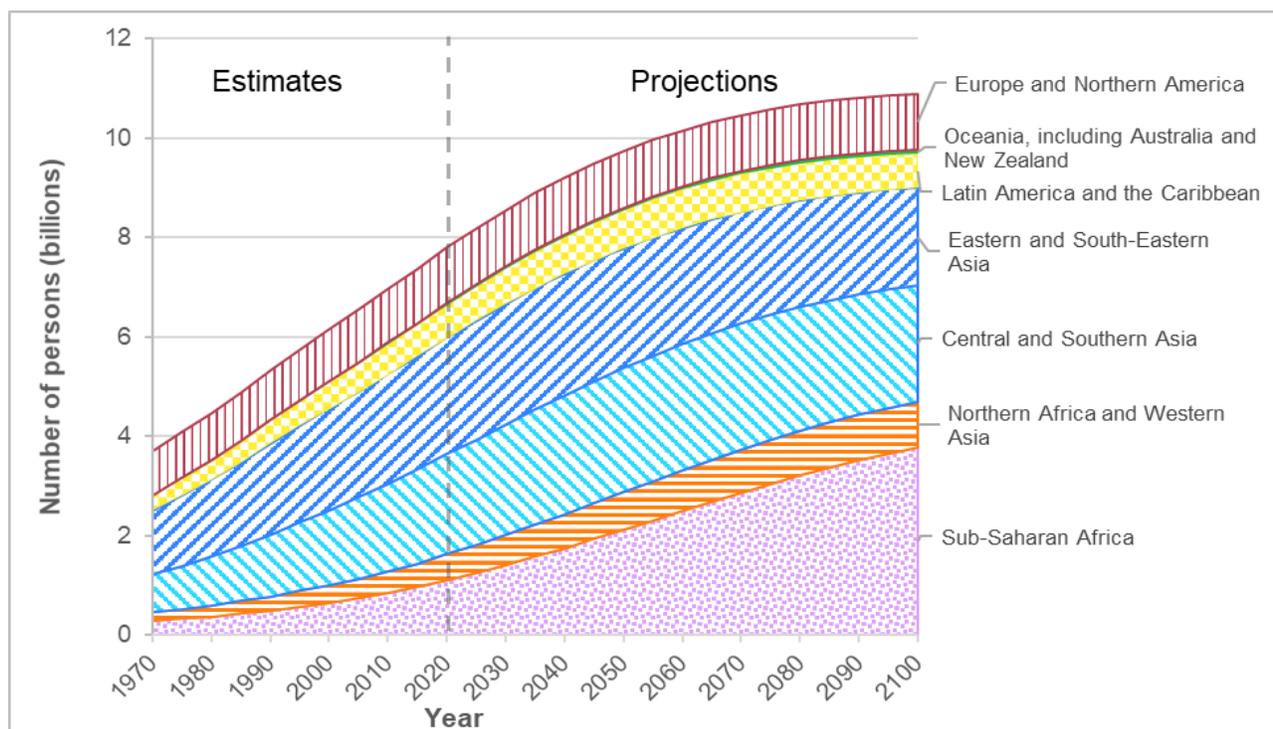
Figure I

Projected future trends of world population, with prediction intervals of 80 and 95 per cent, 1950–2100



11. Trends in population size are projected to take divergent paths across countries and regions. Future growth will be concentrated in certain regions. The population of sub-Saharan Africa, the fastest growing region, is projected to double between 2019 and 2050, increasing by 1.1 billion people (see table 1). The projected growth in Central and Southern Asia will add 0.5 billion to a population of 2.5 billion by 2050. The population of Northern Africa and Western Asia is projected to increase by 0.2 billion by 2050, while the populations of Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and of Latin America and the Caribbean are both expected to grow by 0.1 billion between 2019 and 2050. Those five regions will account for almost all global growth over the next three decades. Meanwhile, the population of Oceania, including Australia and New Zealand, is projected to increase by just 15 million between now and 2050, while Europe and Northern America combined may add around 22 million people. As a direct result of these trends, the proportion of the global population living in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to increase from 14 per cent in 2019 to 22 per cent in 2050. At the same time, the share of the global population living in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia is projected to fall from 30 to 25 per cent, while the share living in Europe and Northern America could decline from 14 to 12 per cent. Other regions are expected to see smaller changes in their share of the world's population over the same period (see figure II).

Figure II
World population by region, 1970–2100



12. While the population of high-income countries³ is projected to grow only slightly in future decades, rising from 1.26 billion in 2019 to 1.32 billion in 2050, over the same period, the population of middle-income countries will grow by more than one fifth, from 5.7 billion to 6.9 billion, and low-income countries will see their combined population almost double, rising from 0.8 billion to 1.5 billion. The total population of the least developed countries will rise from 1 billion in 2019 to 1.9 billion in 2050. Thus, it is expected that the world's fastest population growth over the next three decades will occur in countries facing the greatest challenges in ending poverty and hunger and in ensuring healthy lives, high-quality education, inclusivity and equality for all (see table 1).

III. Fertility and family planning

13. The level of total fertility for the world as a whole declined from an average of 4.5 live births per woman during the period 1970–1975 to 2.5 live births per woman during the period 2015–2020. Globally, total fertility is projected to continue to decline and may reach 2.2 live births per woman in the period 2045–2050 (see figure III). In the period 2015–2020, sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa and Western Asia, and Oceania⁴ had levels of total fertility above the global average of 2.5 live births per woman, while all other regions fell below the global value. In Australia and New Zealand, in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, in Europe and Northern America, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, total fertility in recent years has been below the threshold of 2.1 live births per woman that is required in low-mortality settings to ensure replacement of the population over time (the “replacement level”). On the

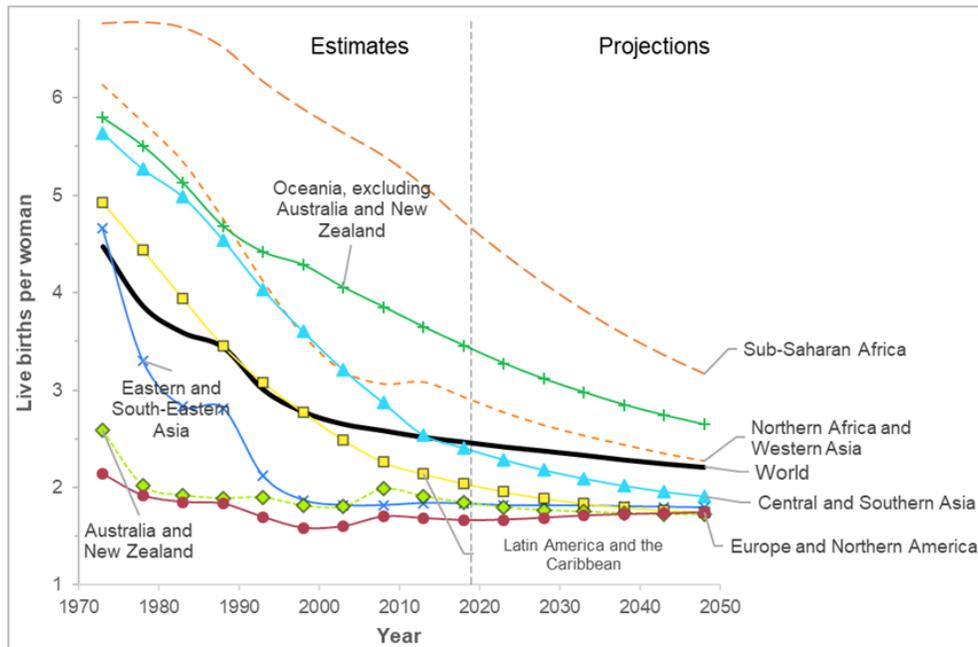
³ As categorized by the World Bank in 2018.

⁴ Unless noted otherwise, all mentions of Oceania in the present report refer to Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand, which are treated here as a separate region.

other hand, 36 countries had total fertility levels of 4.0 or more live births per woman in 2019, of which 33 are in sub-Saharan Africa. Because of their high fertility levels, these countries are growing much faster than the global average and have large proportions of children and youth.

Figure III

Total fertility rate, for the world and by region, 1970–1975 to 2045–2050



14. Fertility contributes to population growth in the long run when it is above the replacement level and to population decline when it lies below that level. However, even if fertility falls immediately to the replacement level or below in a given population, there will be a period of continued growth due to current and future childbearing among relatively large cohorts at younger ages, including in the age range when childbearing typically occurs. This characteristic of demographic growth, known as “population momentum”, limits the potential impact of changes in the fertility level on population trends over the next few decades.

15. Since the 1970s, an increasing number of countries have reached fertility levels below the replacement threshold of around 2.1 births per woman. Some countries have remained below the threshold for several decades. In 1970, about 16 per cent of the world’s population, including nearly all of Europe and Northern America, lived in a country with fertility below the replacement level. In 2019, almost one half of the world’s population lived in 1 of the 94 countries with fertility in this range. Sustained below-replacement fertility is increasingly regarded as a challenge by national Governments because it accelerates the pace of population ageing and leads to population decline in the long run.

16. Between 1990 and 2019, the prevalence of contraceptive use among women aged between 15 and 49 years grew from 42 per cent to nearly 49 per cent, while the number of women using any method of contraception increased from 554 million to 922 million. Owing to the increasing availability of family planning services and information, a growing number of women and men have been able to enjoy the right to decide, freely and responsibly, the number and timing of any children that they may wish to have. Increased levels of contraceptive use, however, have not led to a decline in the number of women with an unmet need for family planning – those who

wish to stop or delay childbearing but are not using any method of contraception to prevent pregnancy. Indeed, even though the proportion of women aged between 15 and 49 years with an unmet need for family planning declined between 1990 and 2019, from over 11 per cent to about 10 per cent, the number of women with an unmet need for family planning increased from 151 million to 190 million. In sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the highest levels of fertility, as many as one in six women between the ages of 15 and 49 years have an unmet need for family planning.

17. Worldwide, the proportion of women whose need for family planning was satisfied with modern contraceptive methods (Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.7.1) increased from 67 per cent in 1990 to 76 per cent in 2019 (see figure IV). Across regions, the demand satisfied by modern methods in 2019 was by far the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa and in Oceania, where the use of modern contraceptive methods among women who wish to prevent pregnancy remained low, at 54.7 per cent and 51.1 per cent, respectively. In addition, the proportion of the need for family planning satisfied by modern methods was below the world average in Northern Africa and Western Asia (63 per cent) and in Central and Southern Asia (68 per cent). In 2019, less than half of the total need for family planning was being met with modern methods in 42 countries, including 23 in sub-Saharan Africa. In an additional 69 countries, more than half but less than three quarters of the total demand was being met by the use of modern methods.

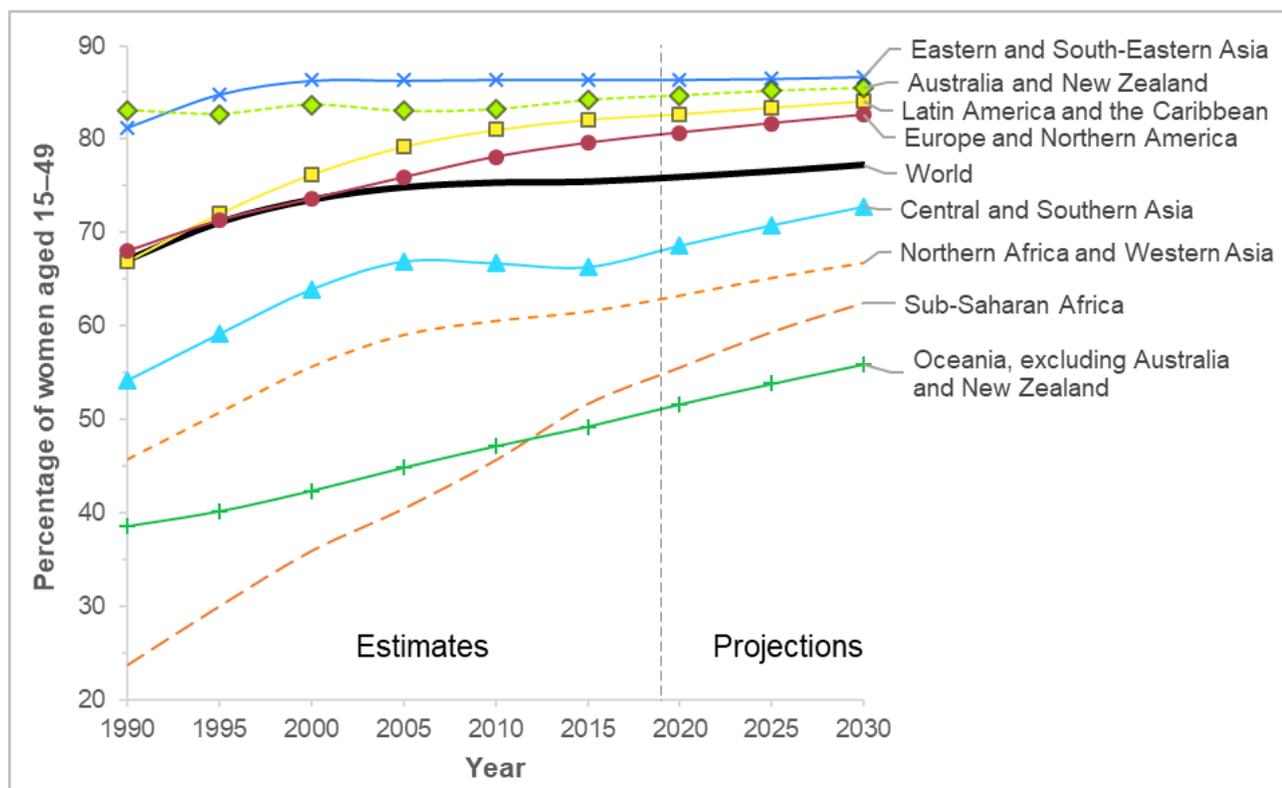
18. Early marriage, early childbearing and unwanted pregnancies often have adverse social and economic consequences for girls and young women, as well as posing health risks to both mother and child. Early marriage is an important predictor and determinant of early childbearing. One positive development in recent decades is that the proportion of young women between 15 and 19 years of age who are married or in a cohabiting union has decreased in most countries.⁵ However, among women in this age range, complications of pregnancy and childbirth remain the leading cause of death globally.⁶ To counter these risks, adolescents need access to sexual and reproductive health-care services designed to meet their specific needs.

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Marriage Data 2019 data set.

⁶ World Health Organization, "Adolescents: health risks and solutions", 13 December 2018. Available at www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescents-health-risks-and-solutions.

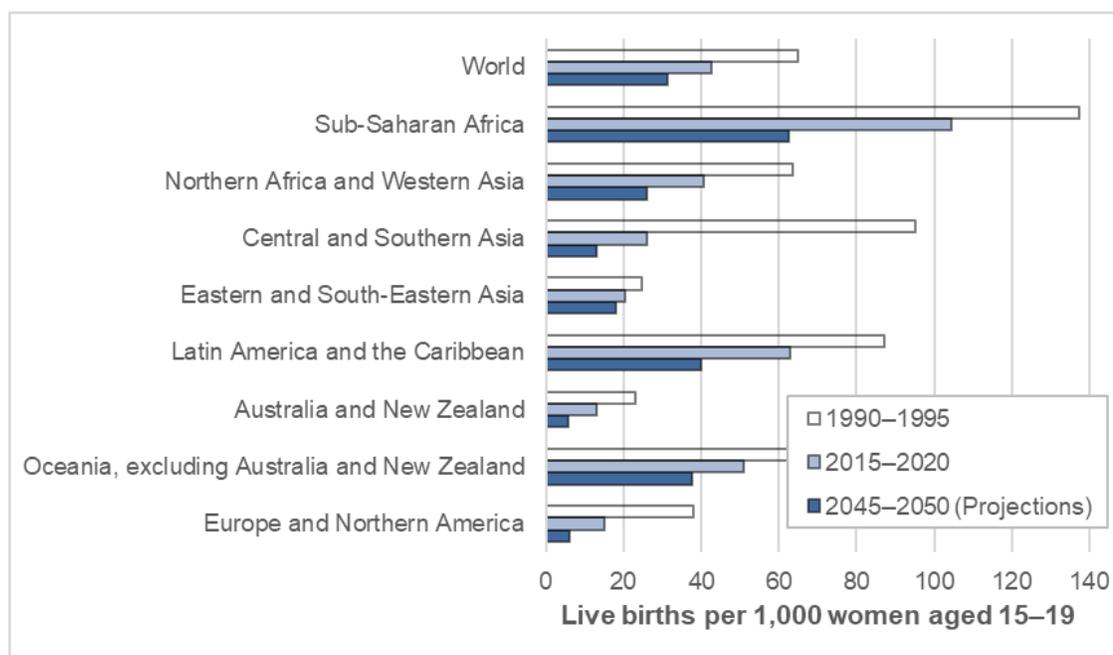
Figure IV

Proportion of women of reproductive age (15–49 years) whose need for family planning is satisfied by modern contraceptive methods, for the world and by region, 1990–2030



19. Investment in the education of girls, the reduction or elimination of early marriages and expanded access to information, education and services in the area of sexual and reproductive health remain priority actions to support a continued decline in adolescent fertility. The global adolescent birth rate was 65 births annually per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 19 years in the early 1990s, but it declined to 43 births per 1,000 women in the period 2015–2020. A further decline to 31 births per 1,000 women is projected for the period 2045–2050 (see figure V). In Latin America and the Caribbean, the adolescent birth rate has also declined significantly, but it remained relatively high in the period 2015–2020, at 63 births per 1,000 women; it is projected to decline to 40 births per 1,000 women in the period 2045–2050. Adolescent fertility is expected to remain high in sub-Saharan Africa, as well, where 23 countries had an adolescent birth rate above 100 births per 1,000 women in the period 2015–2020 and 26 countries are projected to have a rate above 50 births per 1,000 women in the period 2045–2050. In contrast, for other regions, except Oceania, the adolescent birth rate was below 50 births per 1,000 women in the period 2015–2020, and it is projected to drop below 30 births per 1,000 women by 2045–2050.

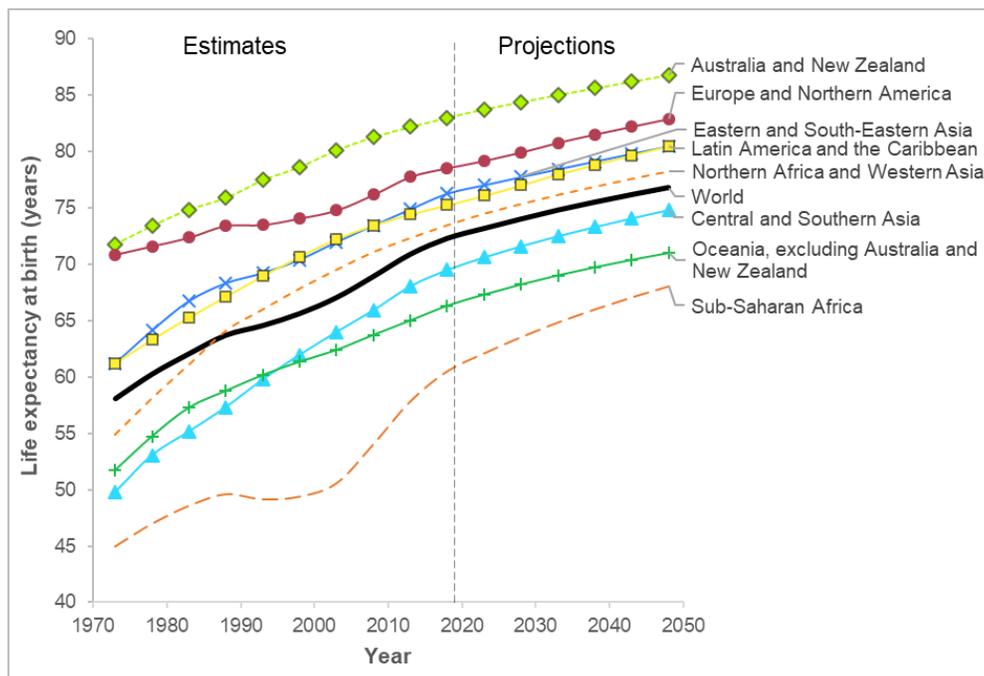
Figure V
Adolescent birth rate, for the world and by region, 1990–1995, 2015–2020 and 2045–2050



IV. Mortality

20. Between the period 1970–1975 and the period 2015–2020, global life expectancy at birth rose by 14.2 years – from 58.1 years to 72.3 years – and it is projected to increase further to 76.8 years in the period 2045–2050 (see figure VI). By the end of the century, global life expectancy at birth is likely to exceed 82 years. In the period 2015–2020, the life expectancy of women at birth was 74.7 years, while that of men was 4.8 years lower, at 69.9 years. The difference in life expectancy at birth between sub-Saharan Africa, and Australia and New Zealand, the regions with the lowest and highest life expectancies, respectively, decreased from 27 years in the period 1970–1975 to 22 years in the period 2015–2020, and it is expected to fall to 19 years in the period 2045–2050.

Figure VI
Life expectancy at birth, for the world and by region, from 1970–1975 to 2045–2050



21. In the period 2015–2020, life expectancy at birth reached 80.3 years in the high-income countries and areas as a whole. Thirty-two countries or areas, mostly in Europe, had a life expectancy of more than 80 years. The highest life expectancy at birth for a national population was recorded for Japan (83.3 years). However, 25 countries, including some of the world’s poorest, have still not reached a life expectancy of 60 years. Life expectancy at birth for the least developed countries as a group was 62.4 years, on average, in the period 2015–2020.

22. For the countries that are heavily affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, the increase in life expectancy at birth since the 1950s was followed by a decrease during the 1980s and 1990s. Life expectancy in that region had reached 49.6 years in the period 1985–1990 but then fell to 49.1 years in the period 1990–1995, followed by small increases until the period 2000–2005. In recent years, some of the losses in longevity due to HIV/AIDS have been reversed, and sub-Saharan Africa achieved a life expectancy at birth of 57.8 years in the period 2015–2020.

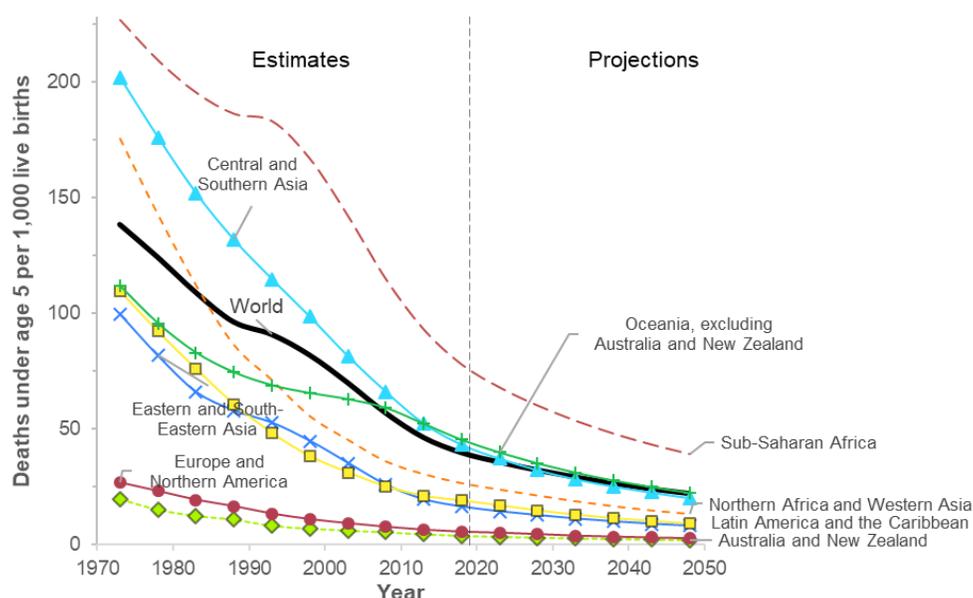
23. In many countries, including many low-income countries, causes of death have shifted from a predominance of communicable diseases to a predominance of non-communicable diseases, such as cancer and cardiovascular disease, which are linked to lifestyle choices, including consumption of tobacco and alcohol, unhealthy diets with high shares of processed foods and lack of physical activity. A growing percentage of the global population, including many children, is affected by overweight and obesity, and the prevalence of diabetes is increasing worldwide. At the same time, after decades of success in combating poverty and hunger, undernourishment has been on the rise again in recent years. Some countries are still struggling in the fight against communicable diseases, such as malaria and tuberculosis, which affect poor populations disproportionately. When mothers are malnourished, the risks of both maternal and child mortality are greater, while the

health and nutritional status of children influence their susceptibility to adverse health conditions later in life (see E/CN.9/2020/2).

24. High levels of infant and child mortality are due largely to the high incidence and fatality of communicable diseases at younger ages. Progress in reducing infant and child mortality from these diseases depends mostly on improvements in living conditions, sanitation and nutrition, and on access to health technologies, such as vaccines, that protect against mortality from infections and malnutrition. The under-5 mortality rate – the probability of dying between birth and a child’s fifth birthday – declined worldwide from 91 deaths per 1,000 live births in the period 1990–1995 to 46 deaths per 1,000 live births in the period 2015–2020 (see figure VII). Over the same period, the largest absolute reduction in under-5 mortality was recorded in sub-Saharan Africa, where the rate declined from 183 to 93 deaths per 1,000 live births, followed by Central and Southern Asia, from 115 to 52; Northern Africa and Western Asia, from 71 to 31; Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, from 53 to 20; Latin America and the Caribbean, from 48 to 21; Oceania, from 69 to 52; Europe and Northern America, from 13 to 6; and Australia and New Zealand, from 8 to 4.

25. Sustainable Development Goal target 3.2 calls for a level of under-5 mortality in 2030 of no more than 25 deaths per 1,000 live births. Australia and New Zealand, Europe and Northern America, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean had already reached this target by the period 2015–2020, for each region as a whole (see figure VII). In addition, the region of Northern Africa and Western Asia is expected to meet target 3.2 by 2030. Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Southern Asia, and Oceania, however, seem unlikely to meet the target if future trends resemble those of recent years. Globally, there are 55 countries, including 41 in sub-Saharan Africa, 2 in Northern Africa and Western Asia, 4 in Central and Southern Asia, 3 in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, 3 in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 2 in Oceania, where target 3.2 is unlikely to be achieved by 2030 if current trends continue, suggesting the need for significant additional resources and effort to obtain the desired result.

Figure VII
Under-5 mortality rate, for the world and by region, from 1970–1975 to 2045–2050

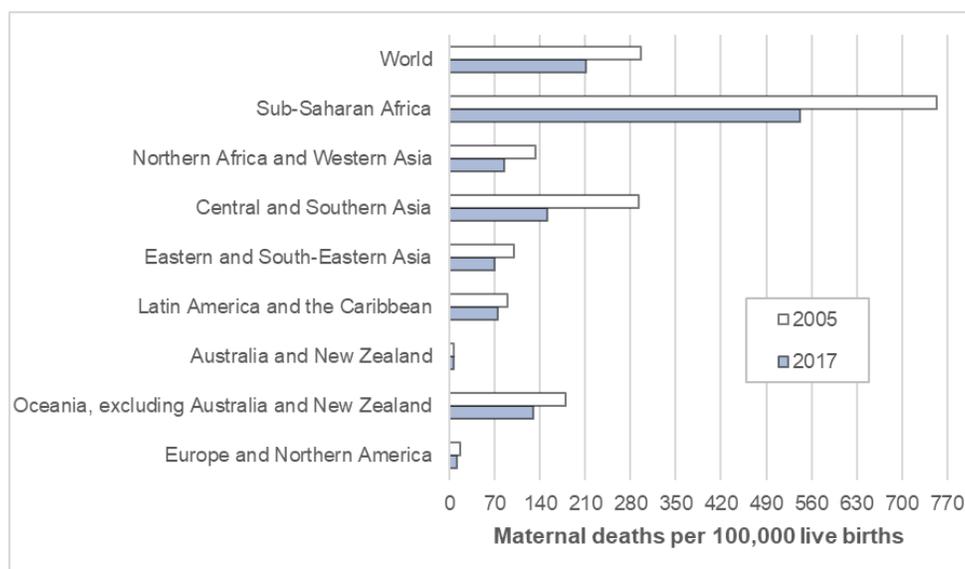


26. Sustainable Development Goal target 3.1 calls for a reduction in the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births by 2030. From 2000 to 2017, the global maternal mortality ratio fell by 38 per cent, to 211 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2017 (see figure VIII). The number of maternal deaths declined from an estimated 452,172 in 2000 to 295,925 in 2017. All developing regions experienced substantial reductions in maternal mortality between 2000 and 2017. However, in 2017, the maternal mortality ratio remained above 500 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in sub-Saharan Africa and above 100 deaths per 100,000 live births in Central and Southern Asia and in Oceania. If target 3.1 is to be achieved globally by 2030, the pace of reducing the maternal mortality ratio will need to be accelerated. According to recent projections, achieving this global goal will require countries to reduce their maternal mortality ratios by at least 6.1 per cent each year between 2016 and 2030. Between 2000 and 2017, only 16 countries (Angola, Belarus, Cambodia, Estonia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Kazakhstan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Nepal, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste and Turkmenistan) experienced reductions in the maternal mortality ratio at this pace or faster.⁷

27. Once life expectancy at birth has reached 70 years or more, further substantial increases require reductions in mortality at older ages, as measured by increased levels of life expectancy at age 60. Globally, the average person turning 60 in the period 2015–2020 could expect to live another 20.7 years. This indicator is projected to rise to 22.9 years in the period 2045–2050. Yet there is wide variation across regions in life expectancy at age 60, ranging from about 16 years in Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa to 25.6 years in Australia and New Zealand. Further increases in survival at older ages will depend mainly on the ability to control the impact of non-communicable diseases, which will become even more challenging as the global population continues to grow older.

Figure VIII

Maternal mortality ratio, for the world and by geographical region, 1970–1975 to 2045–2050



⁷ World Health Organization, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children's Fund, World Bank and United Nations Population Division. *Trends in Maternal Mortality: 2000 to 2017: Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division*. (Geneva, 2019).

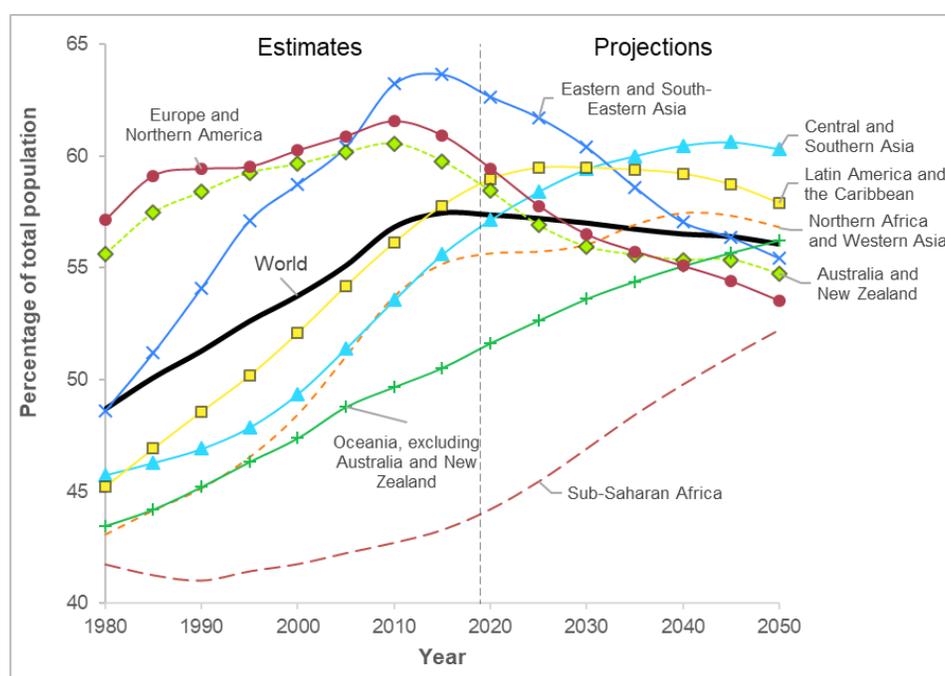
V. Changing population age structures

28. Population ageing is a global trend with major social and economic consequences that is characterized by a gradual upward shift over many decades in the population age distribution, resulting in a larger proportion of the population at older ages and a smaller share at younger ages. The pace of population ageing is determined mainly by the speed and magnitude of the decline in fertility and, to a lesser extent, by the reduction in mortality at older ages. Although international migration also affects the age structure of origin and destination countries, the size of the effect, which depends on the number and age distribution of migrants compared with the populations involved, tends to be much smaller than the impact of changes over time in fertility and mortality.

29. Population ageing can be examined by tracking trends in the age distribution of the population. In 2019, about 57 per cent of the world's population was between the ages of 20 and 64 (see figure IX), while about 34 per cent was under the age of 20 and 9 per cent was aged 65 years or older (henceforth, "older persons"). The share of the working-age population was highest in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and lowest in sub-Saharan Africa. The number of persons under 20 years of age is projected to remain stable at slightly above 2.5 billion between 2019 and 2050, while the number of older persons may increase from 703 million in 2019 to 1.5 billion in 2050. Globally, the share of the population between 20 and 64 years of age is expected to fall slightly, to 56 per cent in 2050, but it will increase in absolute numbers from 4.4 billion in 2019 to 5.5 billion in 2050. Differences across regions in the share of the working-age population are expected to decrease significantly by 2050. A large part of the increased share of persons aged 65 years and over is attributable to the increased share of persons aged 80 years and over, which is expected to increase from 1.9 to 4.4 per cent of the total population worldwide between 2019 and 2050; throughout the world, this age group is growing faster than any younger age group.

Figure IX

Working-age population (20–64 years) as a percentage of total population, for the world and by region, 1980–2050

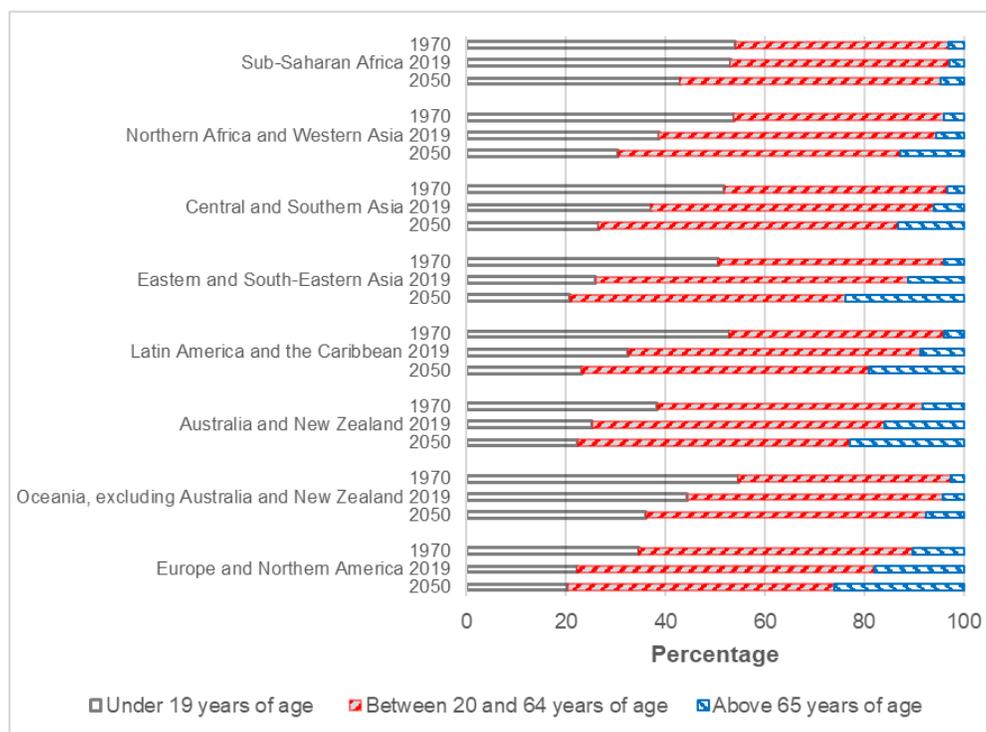


30. Population ageing started at different times and is proceeding at varying speeds across countries and regions. Trends in the share of persons under 20 years of age compared with the share of those aged 65 or over reflect the different stages of the ageing process by region (see figure X). Europe and Northern America, and Australia and New Zealand had the world's highest shares of those aged 65 years or over in 2019, and in Europe and Northern America, the share of persons below 20 years of age was close to reaching that of older persons in 2019. Australia and New Zealand, and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia are projected to follow suit over the next few decades, with the share of older persons expected to exceed that of persons under 20 years of age by 2050. In sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, the share of persons below 20 years of age is expected to decrease to 43 per cent in 2050, while the share of older persons will remain below 5 per cent.

31. When fertility falls and the number of births declines, the immediate effect is a reduction in the proportion of children and a consequent rise in the proportion of the population at ages beyond childhood. Following a substantial reduction in fertility levels, the share of the working-age population typically increases for several decades, but eventually it begins to decline as population ageing becomes more pronounced. During the intervening period, the expansion in the share of the working-age population provides an opportunity for rapid per capita economic growth, known as a “demographic dividend”. Realizing that dividend requires the availability of productive jobs for the growing number of persons of working age. During this demographic window of opportunity, policies to support sustained and inclusive economic growth, promote decent work for all, and expand investments in health and education, in keeping with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, can increase labour productivity and further accelerate the growth of per capita income.

Figure X

Age distribution of the population, by region, 1970, 2019 and 2050 (projections)

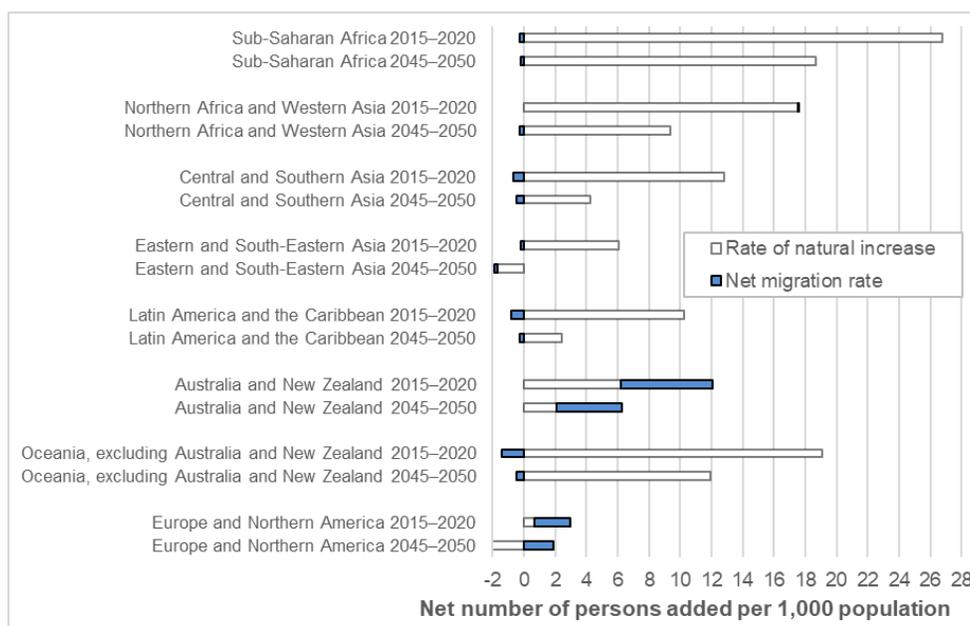


32. While the percentage of the global population between 20 and 64 years of age is expected to remain stable at between 63 and 65 per cent, the share of the working-

age population is expected to be significantly higher in 2050 than today in three regions: sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and Central and Southern Asia. In Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Northern Africa and Western Asia, the share of the working-age population is expected to remain stable. In all other regions, it is expected to continue to decline over the next three decades.

33. In countries with ageing populations and more deaths than births, migration can slow or counter trends of population decline. Indeed, between 2010 and 2020, in 9 countries (Belarus, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Russian Federation, Serbia and Ukraine), a net inflow of migrants helped to offset an excess of deaths over births. However, in 10 other countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova and Romania), a net outflow of international migrants added to the impact of an excess of deaths over births.⁸ Among the regions, the greatest contribution of international migration to population growth between 2015 and 2020 occurred in Australia and New Zealand, while the largest outmigration per 1,000 population occurred in other parts of Oceania (see figure XI). It is projected that international migration will have an increasing impact on future population size in some regions. During the period 2045–2050, international migration is expected to have a relatively large impact on population size and age structure in Europe and Northern America, Australia and New Zealand and Central and Southern Asia. Since international migrants are generally younger than the population of destination countries, international migration helps to postpone the ageing of destination countries. Nevertheless, the demographic impacts of international migration are not large enough to halt or reverse the long-term trend towards population ageing caused by the historical rise in life expectancy at birth and the subsequent decline in fertility.

Figure XI
Population growth attributable to natural increase and net migration, by region, 2015–2020 and 2045–2050 (projections)



Note: For a given time period, “natural increase” is the excess in the number of births over the number of deaths in a population, while “net migration” is the excess in the number of immigrants over the number of emigrants.

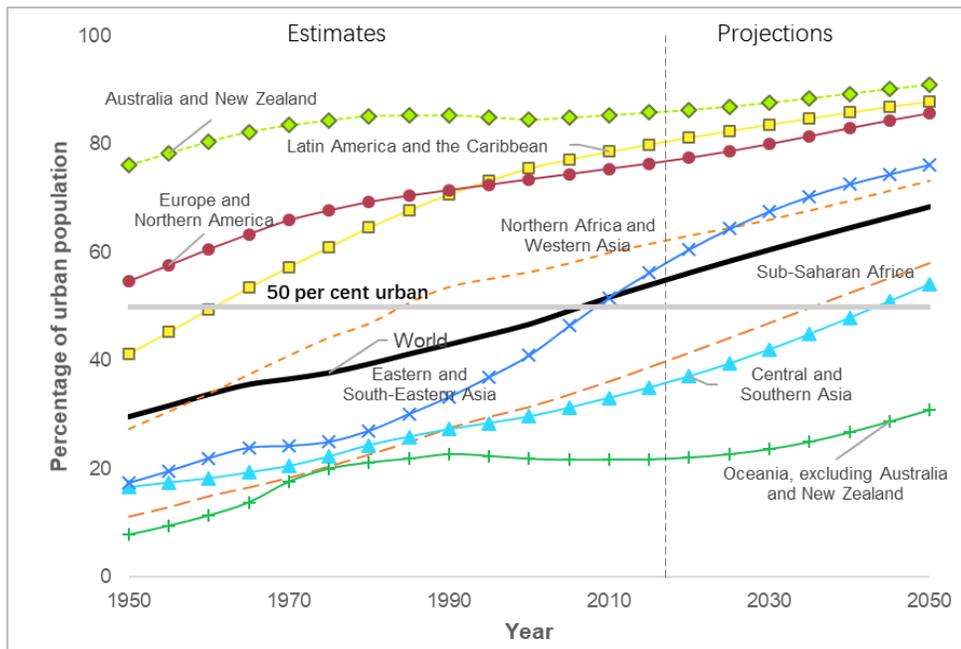
⁸ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population 2019: Wall Chart (ST/ESA/SER.A/434)*.

VI. Urbanization and city growth

34. In 2019, an estimated 56 per cent of people worldwide lived in urban areas. Projections indicate that almost all of the growth in world population in the coming decades will be reflected in an increased number of urban dwellers. By 2030, the share of the world's population living in urban areas is expected to reach 60 per cent, and in 2050, around two thirds of the global population (68 per cent) may be living in urban areas, compared with roughly one third in 1950. Currently, the most urbanized region is Australia and New Zealand at 86 per cent, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean at 81 per cent, Europe and Northern America at 77 per cent, Northern Africa and Western Asia at 62 per cent, and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia at 58 per cent (see figure XII). In 2019, less than half of the population was living in urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa (41 per cent), Central and Southern Asia (36 per cent) and Oceania (22 per cent). However, these regions are urbanizing rapidly. In 2030, it is projected that urban settlements will be home to 47 per cent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa, 42 per cent in Central and Southern Asia and 24 per cent in Oceania. By 2030, the share of the urban population is expected to rise to 88 per cent in Australia and New Zealand, 84 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 80 per cent in Europe and Northern America, 68 per cent in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, and 66 per cent in Northern Africa and Western Asia.

Figure XII

Urban population as a percentage of total population, for the world and by region, 1950–2050



35. As the urban population has grown worldwide, so too have the number of cities and the size of city populations. The number of cities with more than 10 million inhabitants – often called “megacities” – grew from just 10 in 1990 to 33 in 2019 and is projected to rise to 43 in 2030. All megacities that are expected to emerge by 2030 are found in the less developed regions. Urban growth is driven by growth in cities of all sizes. The number of large cities (between 5 million and 10 million inhabitants) increased from 21 in 1990 to 50 in 2019 and is expected to rise further to 66 in 2030. The number of medium-sized cities (between 1 million and 5 million) and of smaller

cities (fewer than 1 million) is increasing, as well, especially in the less developed regions.

36. Urbanization is driven, in part, by migration from rural areas, whose residents move to cities in search of jobs and other opportunities. In addition, an excess of births over deaths in urban areas is an important component of population growth in many cities, particularly in parts of the less developed regions where fertility remains high. Reclassification of rural areas as urban is a third factor contributing to urban increase. Rapid and unplanned urban growth present challenges for sustainable development in the form of urban sprawl, pollution and environmental degradation. Government policies for planning and managing urban growth can help to mitigate these negative effects and should be aimed at sustainability and a more equitable sharing of the benefits of urbanization.

37. Urbanization has generally been a positive force for economic growth and human development. Cities are places where entrepreneurship and technological innovation can thrive. Urban areas also serve as hubs where the proximity of commerce, government and transportation provide the infrastructure necessary for sharing knowledge and information. Sustainable urbanization requires that cities generate adequate income and employment opportunities, provide infrastructure, ensure equitable access to housing and basic services, such as education and health care, minimize the number of people living in slums and preserve natural resources. Cities enjoy greater economies of scale than rural areas and can more efficiently provide infrastructure and services to serve the needs of large populations. With careful planning and sound management, cities have the potential to be economically and environmentally sustainable. Moreover, the linkages that cities and small towns establish with surrounding rural areas facilitate service delivery and infrastructure improvements in those areas.

VII. International migration

38. The number of international migrants – persons currently living outside their country of birth⁹ – has continued to grow in recent years. Worldwide, the number of international migrants reached an unprecedented 272 million in 2019, up from 249 million in 2015, 221 million in 2010 and 174 million in 2000. The average annual rate of growth in the number of international migrants increased from 2.0 per cent during the period 2000–2005 to 2.8 per cent in the period 2005–2010, but then it dropped to 2.4 per cent in the period 2010–2015 and 2.2 per cent during the period 2015–2019.

39. Between 2000 and 2019, the number of international migrants grew by about 98 million. From the perspective of migrant destinations, the largest component of this increase was for Northern Africa and Western Asia, where the number of international migrants rose from 20.3 million in 2000 to 48.6 million in 2019. Over the same interval, the migrant population also grew rapidly in Europe, from 56.9 million to 82.3 million, and in Northern America, from 40.3 million to 58.6 million.

40. The region of origin that contributed the most to the growth in the number of international migrants was Central and Southern Asia, with the number of their nationals living abroad increasing by 19 million, or 62 per cent, between 2000 and 2019. The increase was also significant for the diasporas of migrants from countries of Northern Africa and Western Asia (17.0 million), Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (15.8 million), and Latin American and the Caribbean (15.7 million).

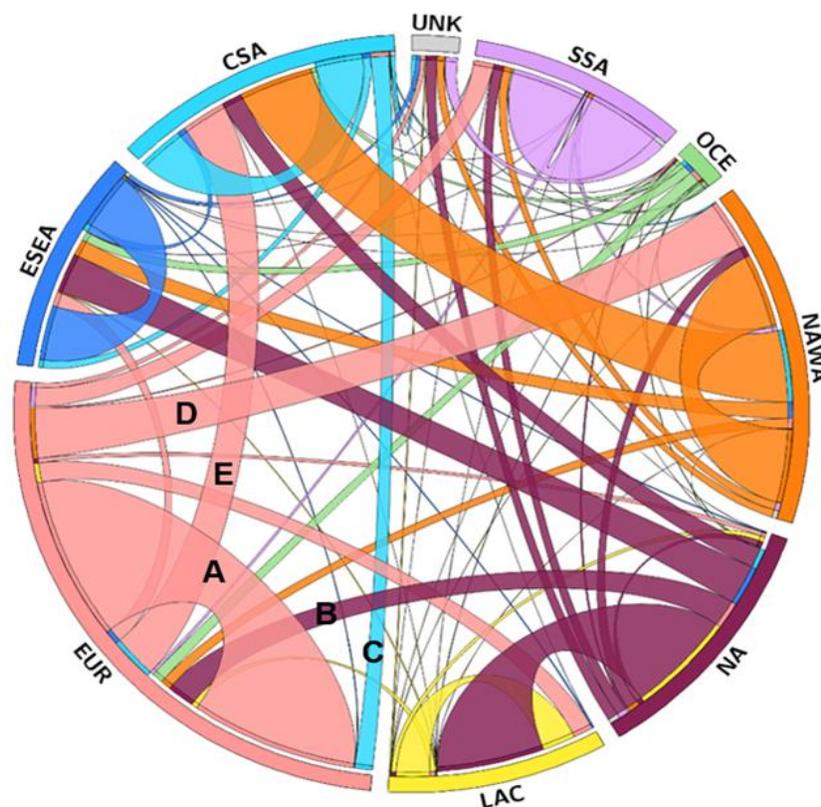
⁹ Or country of citizenship, when data on country of birth are not available.

41. At the end of 2017, the total number of refugees and asylum seekers in the world reached an estimated 28.7 million (representing about 11 per cent of all international migrants), up from 24.7 million in mid-2015. Nearly 83 per cent of the world's refugees and asylum seekers were hosted by countries in the developing regions. Turkey hosted the largest number, with around 3.8 million persons. The second largest country of asylum was Jordan (around 2.9 million), followed by the State of Palestine (2.2 million), Lebanon (1.6 million), Germany (1.4 million) and Pakistan (1.4 million). The main countries of origin of refugees and asylum seekers were the Syrian Arab Republic (6.5 million), the State of Palestine (5.9 million), Afghanistan (3.0 million), South Sudan (2.4 million) and Myanmar (1.2 million).¹⁰

42. Overall, about 42 per cent of international migrants in 2019 resided in countries of the region in which they were born. Most international migrants born in Europe (69 per cent), sub-Saharan Africa (65 per cent), Northern Africa and Western Asia (51 per cent) and Oceania (50 per cent) were living in another country of the same region in 2019 (see figure XIII). Conversely, most international migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean (80 per cent), Central and Southern Asia (77 per cent), Northern America (70 per cent) and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (61 per cent) were residing outside their region of birth.

¹⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR Statistics: The World in Numbers database. Available at: <http://popstats.unhcr.org> (accessed on 11 January 2019). United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, "UNRWA in figures 2018: fact sheet". Available at: www.unrwa.org (accessed on 11 January 2019).

Figure XIII
Numbers of international migrants, by regions of origin and destination, 2019



Note: Bands linking two parts of the outer circle connect regions of origin and destination of international migrants. The width of each band, at the point where it touches the outer circle, is proportional to the number of international migrants from the origin region who resided in the destination region in 2019. Bands are colour-coded by region of destination. For example, most migrants from Europe had settled in the same region (band A). After the region itself, the most popular destinations for migrants from Europe were Northern America (band B) followed by Central and Southern Asia (band C). Similarly, after the region itself, the greatest number of migrants residing in Europe had come from Northern Africa and Western Asia (band D), followed by Central and Southern Asia (band E).

Abbreviations: SSA, sub-Saharan Africa; OCE, Oceania, including Australia and New Zealand; NAWA, Northern Africa and Western Asia; NA, Northern America; LAC, Latin American and the Caribbean; EUR, Europe; ESEA, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia; CSA, Central and Southern Asia; UNK, unknown.

VIII. Conclusions

43. The world's population reached 7.7 billion in 2019. Global population growth, currently at a rate of 1.1 per cent per year, is expected to slow in the coming decades, reaching zero growth around the end of the century. Because it affects the scale of human consumption and production, global population growth will continue to pose a challenge to sustainable development. Countries are also facing diverse challenges and opportunities in connection with the other demographic megatrends (population ageing, urbanization and international migration).

44. The global population may peak at close to 11 billion around the end of the century. Population growth over the coming years will increase the effort required to achieve sustained and inclusive economic growth (Sustainable Development Goal 8), eliminate poverty and hunger (Goals 1 and 2), ensure healthy lives and quality

education (Goals 3 and 4), achieve gender equality (Goal 5) and ensure access to water, sanitation and modern energy for all (Goals 6 and 7).

45. Recognizing that people, and thus populations, are at the centre of sustainable development, a fuller integration of population dynamics into development planning and review processes will assist countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and targets by 2030. Most of the population increase in future decades will take place in the 47 least developed countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the challenges of ending poverty and hunger and ensuring access to health care, education and equal opportunity for all are the greatest.

46. The number of persons added to the global population every year, currently about 82 million, will decline slowly in future years. By 2030, the annual increase in the world's population will be close to 71 million, and by 2050, about 48 million. Together with other factors of demand, future population growth will influence the required increase in global food production. Keeping up with rising demand will require significant changes in current practices, and it will be easier to meet the future demand sustainably if population growth decelerates.

47. Significant progress has been made since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in reducing the unmet need for family planning, although large disparities between and within countries remain. Increased investment will be needed to ensure that universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services and information, including for family planning, is well integrated into national plans to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

48. High fertility has become an exception, as the global fertility level has declined to 2.5 live births per woman in recent decades. However, many countries still have fertility levels higher than 4.0 births per woman, resulting in rapid population growth and a relatively youthful population. These countries face a special challenge to invest in education, health and access to other basic services for a growing population and to generate sufficient productive employment for an increasing number of young people.

49. Countries and regions at intermediate stages of the demographic transition may benefit from a shift in the population age distribution resulting from recent declines in fertility. An increased concentration of the working-age population offers the possibility of accelerated per capita economic growth. However, the window of opportunity for reaping this "demographic dividend" lasts for only a few decades.

50. In Europe, Northern America and parts of Eastern Asia, where the demographic transition was completed earlier, countries are now facing the challenges of an ageing population. Countries with sustained below-replacement fertility levels have much older population age structures. Without an increase in levels of fertility or immigration, they will eventually experience a decrease in population size.

51. The ongoing rise in life expectancy at birth is expected to continue until the end of the present century. By the period 2045–2050, global life expectancy could be almost four years higher than it is today. Countries with high levels of mortality at present are expected to experience above-average gains in life expectancy in the future. For such countries, a continued rise in life expectancy at birth will require further substantial reductions in child and maternal mortality to be achieved, while also addressing hunger and malnutrition, reducing the burden of major communicable diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, and reducing premature mortality from non-communicable diseases linked to unhealthy lifestyles.

52. The process of urbanization is expected to continue, and by 2050, around two thirds of the global population is expected to live in urban areas. Making cities and all human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Goal 11) contributes to improving the quality of life for all. Urbanization has generally been a positive

force for economic growth and human development, and it will be vital for providing employment opportunities and access to services for a growing global population. When properly managed, urbanization can help in combating poverty, inequality and environmental degradation.

53. Governments have increasingly recognized the contribution of international migration to sustainable development and have agreed on the importance of international cooperation to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration, with full respect for human rights and humane treatment of all migrants, refugees and displaced persons. The increasing numbers of international migrants in recent years, including refugees and asylum seekers, have drawn attention to the issues and increased the priority given to international migration on the global agenda. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the global compact on refugees, both adopted in December 2018, lay a foundation for national action and international cooperation in these areas, in a manner consistent with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

54. The availability of high-quality, accessible, timely and reliable demographic data, disaggregated according to key characteristics of individuals, is essential for planning and implementing policies and programmes in the follow-up to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
