

Elderly population boom, AIDS death slowdown by 2050: UN

The number of people over the age of 60 is expected to triple by 2050, according to a 2006 revision of 'World Population Prospects' by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division. And India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, the US, Bangladesh and China will account for half of the world's 2.5 billion extra people by 2050

Globally, the number of people over 60 years of age will nearly triple to 2 billion by 2050, making up close to 25% of the expected population. This, according to new United Nations estimates that predict that global population will swell by 2.5 billion from the current 6.7 billion in the next 43 years.

However, most of the growth in the world is expected to come from poorer nations, the 2006 revision of 'World Population Prospects' by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division says. "While the population at the global level is on track to surpass 9 billion by 2050 and hence continues to increase, that of the more developed regions is hardly changing and will age very markedly" Among the rest of the developing countries, rapid population ageing is forecast," says the report.

Despite lowered fertility rates, the report predicts that the population of the developed world is expected to remain almost unchanged during the next 43 years, at 1.2 billion, chiefly due to migration. Despite immigration barriers, migration from poor to rich nations is expected to make up for labour shortages in the developed world.

Still, the populations of 46 countries including Germany , Italy , Japan , South Korea , most of the former Soviet states, and several small island states are expected to be lower in 2050 than what they are now.

But the populations of Afghanistan , Burundi , the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea-Bissau , Liberia , Niger , East Timor and Uganda are forecast to triple within the next four decades.

The report says India , Nigeria , Pakistan , the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia , the United States , Bangladesh and China will account for half of the world's 2.5 billion extra people by 2050.

Old age is in

"One of the surprises is that population growth is most concentrated in the 60-plus age-group," Hania Zlotnik, Director of the UN Population Division, told a press briefing in New York held to launch the report.

"The place where the action is, is the older population," she said. "The biggest change will occur in the developing world, and developing countries will have to cope with the situation" by investing in both education and care of the elderly.

Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of the UN Population Fund, said the world as a whole faces the challenge of meeting the needs of older people, while looking after the young, particularly in developing countries. "Population aging is a 20th century phenomenon resulting partly from improvements in life expectancy," she said.

Effects of increased anti-retroviral coverage

An important change in the new population estimate is a decrease in expected deaths from HIV/AIDS because of the increasing use of anti-retroviral drugs and the downward revision of the prevalence of the disease in some countries. The UN report estimates 32 million fewer deaths from AIDS during the 2005-2020 period, in the 62 most affected countries, compared with a previous estimate in 2004.

The projected population trends also depend on achieving a major increase in the proportion of AIDS patients who get anti-retroviral therapy to treat the disease, and on the success of efforts to control the further spread of HIV.

"We are expecting a relatively good coverage of anti-retroviral drugs in 31 of the most affected countries by 2015," Zlotnik said. "According to our estimates, 70% of the affected people are going to get treatment. Given that, we're postponing the deaths by several years." On average, those receiving treatment are expected to live 7.5 years longer than those who are not.

The non-baby boom

The report says the prevailing trend in developed countries of not enough babies being born to replace people dying will continue, while fertility in the least developed nations will decline but still remain higher than the rest of the world. "Rich nations concerned with too-low fertility should emulate neighbours that have successfully introduced family-friendly policies to make careers and parenthood more compatible," Obaid said. "They should create an environment that makes it easier for men and women to combine parenthood and careers. No one should be forced to choose one or the other."

As a result of declining fertility and increasing longevity, the populations of more and more countries are ageing rapidly. Between 2005 and 2050, half of the increase in the world's population will be accounted for by an increase in the number of people aged 60 years or more, whereas the number of children (persons under 15 years) will decline slightly.

Furthermore, in the more developed regions, the population aged 60 or over is expected nearly to double (from 245 million in 2005 to 406 million in 2050), whereas that of persons under the age of 60 will likely decline (from 971 million in 2005 to 839 million in 2050).

According to the 2006 revision, fertility in less developed countries as a whole is expected to drop from 2.75 children per woman, in 2005-2010, to 2.05 in 2045-2050. To achieve such reductions it is essential that access to family planning expands in the poorest countries, the report says, pointing out that without this the world's population could increase by twice as many people as those alive in 1950.

Reacting to the findings, Obaid said they serve as a wake-up call to the urgency of giving couples the means to exercise their human right to freely determine the size of their families.

"Currently, about 200 million women in these countries lack access to safe and effective contraceptive services," the UNFPA director said in a news release. "Funding for family planning must be increased to meet the needs of these women, not only to determine the world's future, but also to prevent unintended pregnancies and reduce maternal and infant deaths."

The increase from 6.7 billion to 9.2 billion is equivalent to the total size of the world population in 1950, and it will be absorbed mostly by the less developed regions whose population is projected to rise from 5.4 billion in 2007 to 7.9 billion in 2050.

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