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# World Population Ageing 2023

## Challenges and opportunities of population ageing in the least developed countries

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*Population ageing is an inevitable outcome of the demographic transition — the historic shift from higher to lower levels of fertility and mortality that gives rise to a period of rapid population increase and, eventually, a growing older population. The least developed countries (LDCs), many of which are still in the early stages of the demographic transition, can anticipate a continuing, gradual increase in both the number and the share of older persons. Today, many LDCs are ill-prepared to offer the essential services and support that will eventually be needed by their ageing populations.*

*The following key messages are based on **World Population Ageing 2023: Challenges and opportunities of population ageing in the least developed countries**, prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).*

## Ten key messages

### 1. The pace of the demographic transition in most LDCs has been relatively slow.

Most LDCs, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>1</sup>, experience persistent high levels of fertility, rapid population growth and youthful age structures. Overall, 24 LDCs are currently in the early stages of the demographic transition, most of which are located in sub-Saharan Africa, 19 are in the mid-transition stage, and 3 (Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal) are in an advanced stage.

### 2. Changing age structures present challenges and opportunities for development.

As fertility begins to decline, the size of the working-age population will increase in relative terms. This temporary shift towards a more favourable age structure can result in accelerated economic growth, a process referred to as the demographic dividend. Whether a country is able to harness this demographic window of opportunity depends its ability to provide quality education and employment for its growing labour force, and to make productive investments.

### 3. A slow decline in fertility makes it challenging for LDCs to build human capital.

In 2023, about half of the population in LDCs was under 20 years of age. Net enrolment rates for primary and secondary education in LDCs in 2018 were 81 and 38 per cent, respectively. Unless enrolment rates increase dramatically, more than 100 million children aged 12 to 17 years could be excluded from secondary education by 2050. LDCs in Africa will face the greatest pressure to absorb a rapidly growing school-age population into their education systems in order to benefit from the demographic dividend.

<sup>1</sup> In this report, LDCs refer to the 46 countries designated by the United Nations as of 1 October 2023.

#### **4. LDCs need to create productive and decent jobs to benefit from their growing workforce.**

Between 2023 and 2050, the working-age population will increase more than threefold in African LDCs and in Haiti, whereas this pace will be much slower in LDCs located in the Asia-Pacific region. For countries aiming at harnessing the demographic dividend, Governments with limited fiscal space need to balance investments in youth with improving social protection and health care services for the increasing numbers of older persons.

#### **5. Past population growth has created relatively large numbers of older persons in some LDCs.**

Some LDCs in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Bangladesh, Cambodia and Myanmar, have already large numbers and proportions of older persons, but continue to lack well-developed social protection systems and health-care services. Ten LDCs have over one million older persons, whereas five LDCs have surpassed two million older persons. Bangladesh has already over 10 million people aged 65 years or over.

#### **6. All LDCs are expected to experience accelerated population ageing.**

By 2050, 27 LDCs are expected to have more than one million older persons, including two countries with more than 10 million older persons. As in other parts of the world, women constitute the majority of older persons in LDCs. Preparing for population ageing in LDCs will be essential for upholding the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that no one will be left behind.

#### **7. Case studies provide insights into the harnessing the demographic dividend.**

The experience of Angola highlights that rapid economic growth must be accompanied by diversifying the economy to create opportunities for decent employment to reduce poverty and inequalities. Rwanda has prioritized family planning as part of its development agenda to accelerate its demographic transition, supported by policies aimed at harnessing the demographic dividend. Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in human capital formation and in gender equality in primary and secondary education, laying a solid foundation for sustainable development.

#### **8. Despite progress made, LDCs continue to face structural impediments.**

The three case studies illustrate that LDCs have made considerable strides in economic and social development since gaining independence. However, most countries continue to be hamstrung by governance challenges, excessive foreign debt, high levels of poverty, deepening socio-economic inequalities, low levels of education, struggling health care systems and a need to diversify their economies.

#### **9. Understanding the demographic transition is key for formulating development policies.**

Countries which are in the early stages of the demographic transition should prioritize investments in health care, including in reproductive health and family planning, and in education and job creation. Mid-transition countries may wish to focus on developing their social protection and health-care systems. Late-transition countries with already considerable numbers of older populations should use resources accrued during earlier stages of the demographic transition in support of policies and programmes for older persons.

#### **10. Countries and people with limited capacity are most affected by multiple crises.**

The international community is called upon to provide the support needed to live up to the promise made in 2015 when world leaders pledged to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.



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