

The population in Asia and the Pacific is growing at less than 1 per cent per annum

In 2013, the total population of the Asia-Pacific region stood at 4.3 billion, which is 60 per cent of the world's population. Currently, there are 1.8 billion in South and South-West Asia, 1.6 billion in North and North-East Asia, 0.6 billion in South-East Asia, 0.2 billion in North and Central Asia and 38 million in the Pacific. The region hosts the two most populous countries in the world: China with 1.4 billion people and India with 1.25 billion people.

Overall population growth in the region is slowing down with a growth rate of 0.96 per cent per annum. Different speeds of population growth in the subregions will shift the region's composition (figure 1). While in 1980, 42 per cent of the region's population was living in East and North-East Asia, by 2050, only 31 per cent of the region's population will live there. Instead, in 2050 almost half of the region's population will live in South and South-West Asia. As the fastest growing subregion, although still small, the share of the Pacific of the region's total population is also growing from 0.8 per cent in 1980 to 1.1 per cent in 2050.

In some countries the phase of the demographic dividend is over, while other countries can still harness it

The region as a whole has undergone the demographic transition, which is the move from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality. Fertility in the region as a whole is now at 2.1 births

Figure 1 Population size by ESCAP subregions, 1980, 2013 and 2050



Source ESCAP. *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2013*, forthcoming.

per woman in 2012, which is considered the replacement level. This demographic transition changed the region's age structure significantly. Due to fertility declines, the proportion of the working population of the whole region is currently at its peak (see figure 2). However, the proportion of the working-age population is expected to decline, while the proportion of older persons is increasing.

Different countries in the region are in different stages of the demographic transition. Some countries moved to aged societies two decades ago. Other countries, such as the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Thailand have been able to harness the demographic dividend in the past, but are now moving to aged societies with a decreasing working-age population. Other countries, such as China and Viet Nam, are still in the phase with a large working-age population, but this window of opportunity may close soon due to rapid fertility declines. A large number of countries in the region are still in the phase with an increasing working population. The challenge for these countries will be to translate this into a demographic dividend by ensuring an educated and healthy working age population and creating jobs for people entering the labour force.

However, there are still countries where mortality levels have been reduced, but fertility is still relatively high. Countries and areas with highest total fertility rates in the region are Afghanistan with 6.0, Solomon Islands with 4.1, American Samoa with 4.0, as well as Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu with 3.8 births per woman, pointing at large unmet needs for family planning.

The population has begun to shrink in several Asia-Pacific countries.

Many countries in the region now have fertility rates below replacement level (figure 3). Persistently low fertility rates, sometimes combined with high out-migration rates, have led to shrinking populations in some countries. This is the case for Niue with a negative population growth rate of -2.9 per cent in 2013, Georgia with -0.4 per cent, Russian Federation with -0.2 per cent and Japan with -0.1 per cent.

In some countries, low fertility levels are compensated by high in-migration, such as in Macao, China; Hong Kong, China and Singapore. Other countries have recently started to seek to address

Figure 2 **Age structure of the population in the ESCAP region, 1950–2050 (projections: 2011–2050)**



Source United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2012). *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision*, CD-ROM Edition. Accessed on 7 October 2013.

shrinking populations by adopting policies for labour in-migration, for example the Russian Federation. Some countries, such as the Republic of Korea, seek to increase fertility through family policies, which contributed to increased fertility in recent years.

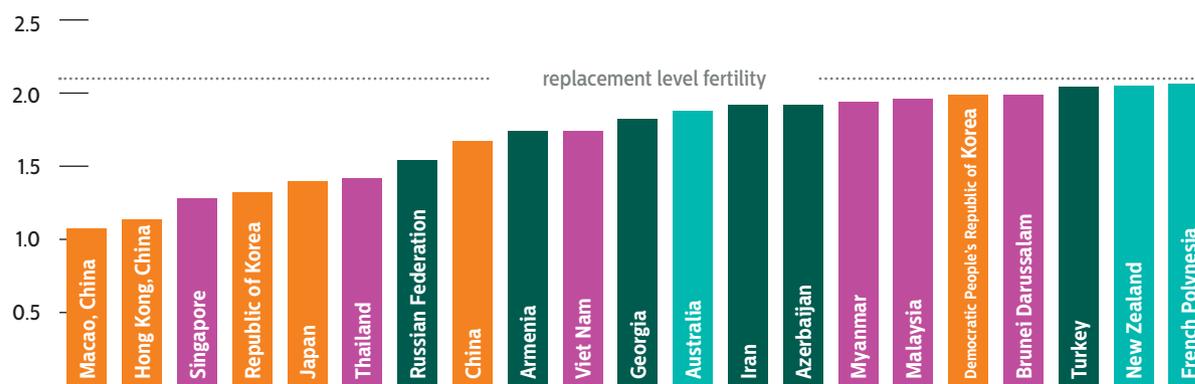
If fertility and migration levels remain at the current level, more countries will experience shrinking populations by 2030, such as Thailand and Armenia. By 2050 it is expected that the population of even more countries will shrink if no adequate policies, such as encouraging in-migration, are taken.

Asia and the Pacific is ageing at an unprecedented pace

Population ageing has two dimensions: individuals are living longer, and the share of older persons in the total population is increasing (see figure 2). Older persons comprised 11.4 per cent of the region's population in 2013 and are expected to reach about one fifth of the population by 2050. Life expectancy at birth in the region is currently at 71.4 years.

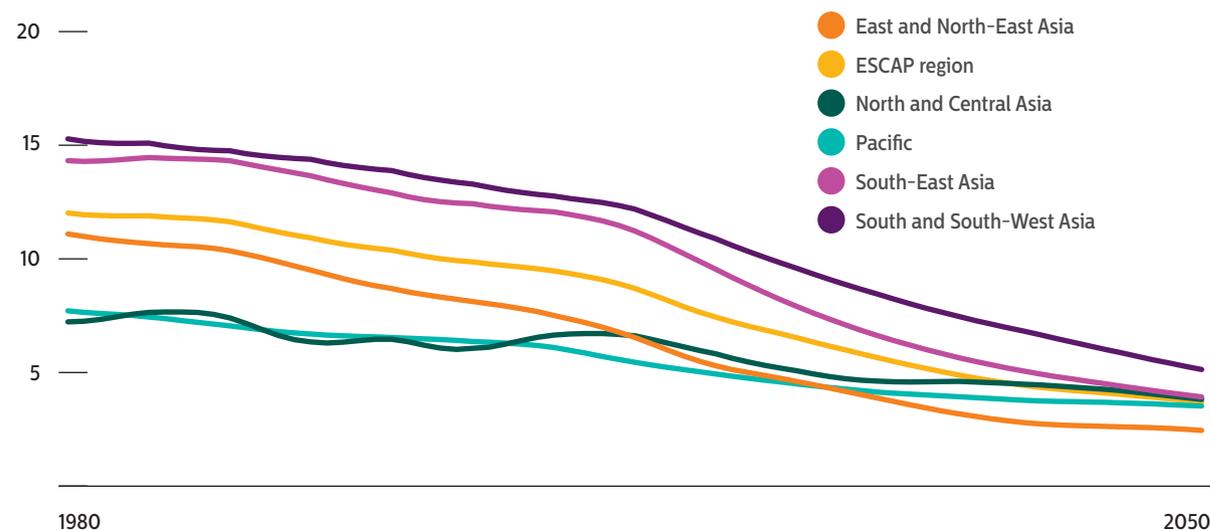
As a result of the region's ageing, the old-age support ratio, which is the number of persons aged 15 to 64 years per person aged 65 or older, has decreased in the region from 12.1 in 1980 to 9.1 in 2013 and is expected to be at 3.7 in 2050. East and North-East Asia has the lowest old-age support ratio (figure 4). The old-age support ratio is particularly low in Japan with 2.6, and Georgia, Australia and New Zealand with 4.7. Low old-age support ratios are expected to have several economic and social implications, such as negative impact on pension schemes when a shrinking working population has to finance the pensions of an increasing number of older persons.

Figure 3 Total fertility rates for countries below replacement level fertility (2.1 children per woman), 2010–2015



Source United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2013). *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision*, CD-ROM Edition.

Figure 4 Trends in old-age support ratio by subregion, 1980–2050



Source ESCAP. *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2013*. forthcoming.



Policy recommendations

Include population issues in development planning

As the Asia-Pacific region is facing rapid demographic change, it is essential that population dynamics are taken into account in the formulation of development policies. The potential for a demographic dividend remains strong in many countries in the region, but requires that appropriate measures are put in place. Creating sustainable pension systems to support ageing populations, generating decent employment opportunities for youth, addressing the impacts of future negative population growth and managing the impacts of urbanization and international migration, all are critical actions for policymaking.

Strengthen data collection and analysis for development planning and monitoring

Disaggregated data are vital as is quality, regular and timely information. Development planning should adequately reflect the linkage between population trends and economic and social development through strengthening data collection disaggregated by gender and age groups as well as conducting further research on the inter-linkage between population trends, poverty and economic development. In order to be able to monitor population trends, a well-functioning system of civil registration and vital statistics is critical.

Adopt policies to harness the demographic dividend

Countries that have rather recently undergone a demographic transition may now benefit from the window of opportunity.

However, the period to harness this window of opportunity is limited. The demographic dividend may not materialize if not accompanied with adequate youth policies, such as policies promoting employment for young people. This starts with education policies which should not only focus on enrolment rates, but also emphasize school completion and adapt curricula to the needs of the labour markets. Further, promoting youth employment, through economic policies such as promoting entrepreneurship and economic development in rural areas will be vital to harness the demographic dividend.

Address new challenges posed by ageing societies and shrinking populations

The region is increasingly challenged by low fertility leading to ageing societies and in some cases shrinking populations. Countries have to be prepared for ageing societies through establishing adequate social security systems and strengthening health systems.

Changing age structures emanating from low fertility rates can also be addressed by designing policies encouraging immigration or family policies that may encourage fertility. Declining working age populations can also be addressed by taking measures to increase productivity, such as increasing the technology-intake of production to be able to materialize economic growth in spite of a shrinking workforce.

Addressing the unfinished agenda: strengthening reproductive health programmes

Fertility is still high in several countries or areas of the region, often resulting from unmet need for family planning. In those cases, there is still a need to improve access to family planning. In this context, empowering women and expanding women's education is crucial.