

Rise in world population derails Sustainable Development Goals

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The UN's 17 heavily-promoted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have long been undermined by the three-year-old Covid-19 pandemic and the devastation caused to the world economy by the after-effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

But now a third factor is threatening to derail the implementation of the SDGs: a projected rise in world population which is expected to reach 8 billion by November this year, according to the latest figures in a new UN report titled "World Population Prospects 2022" released July 11 by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).

"The relationship between population growth and sustainable development is complex and multidimensional," said Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs.

"Rapid population growth makes eradicating poverty, combatting hunger and malnutrition, and increasing the coverage of health and education systems more difficult. Conversely, he pointed out, achieving the SDGs, especially those related to health, education and gender equality, will contribute to reducing fertility levels and slowing global population growth."

The 17 SDGs, which are expected to be reached by 2030, include the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty, achievement of quality education and gender empowerment, reduction of inequalities, affordable and clean energy, and the building of sustainable cities.

John Wilmoth, Director, Population Division of the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, said the Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development back in 2015. At the core of this agenda are the 17 SDGs, which "constitute an ambitious call-for-action to end poverty and hunger, protect the planet and improve the current lives and future prospects of all people everywhere".

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Reducing social and economic inequalities is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. Yet many inequalities persist and are deepening, both within and across countries and regions.

"Today, the probability of living a long, healthy and fulfilling life, and the challenges and opportunities that people encounter every day, differ vastly around the world," he pointed out.

Negative impact

Asked about the possible negative impact of rising population on SDGs, Wilmoth told IDN that sustained high fertility and rapid population growth present challenges to the achievement of sustainable development.

"The necessity of educating growing numbers of children and young people, for example, draws resources away from efforts to improve the quality of education received by each individual child."

At the same time, he pointed out, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to health, education and gender equality, is likely to hasten the transition towards lower fertility in countries with continuing high levels.

In most countries of sub-Saharan Africa, he said, the share of the population at working ages has been in-



creasing thanks to recent reductions in fertility. This shift in the age distribution provides a time-bound opportunity for accelerated economic growth per capita, known as the "demographic dividend".

To maximise the potential benefits of favourable age distribution, he argued, countries should invest in the further development of their human capital by ensuring access to health care and quality education at all ages and by promoting opportunities for productive employment and decent work.

According to the UN report, the largest increase in population—more than halfway through 2050—will be in sub-Saharan Africa.

Asked for any specific reason, Joseph Chamie, a consulting demographer and former director of the United Nations Population Division, told IDN the reason for sub-Saharan Africa's major population contribution is continuing high fertility rates.

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He pointed out that many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have some of the world's highest fertility rates. African countries with an average of about five or more children per woman include Angola, DR Congo, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Somalia, he noted.

Meanwhile, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) said in a statement released last week "the challenges facing humanity are acute: generation-defining issues such as climate change, conflict and Covid-19 are disproportionately affecting the most marginalized and vulnerable among us".

To date, millions continue to live in poverty and suffer from hunger and malnutrition, do not have access to healthcare and social protection, and are unable to complete quality primary and secondary education.

"Women around the world are still denied the fundamental right to make decisions over their bodies and futures, and we are seeing a worrying roll-back of progress on women's

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rights in many countries," the UN agency said.

"Despite these challenges, the story behind 8 billion and how we've got here is a story of triumph. We have reduced poverty and achieved remarkable advancements in health care. There are more of us humans than ever before due, in part, to increasing life expectancy and declining infant and maternal mortality."

UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem said: "This is a success story, not a doomsday scenario. Our world, despite its challenges, is one where higher shares of people are educated and live healthier lives than at any previous point in history."

"Focusing exclusively on population totals and growth rates misses the point—and often leads to coercive and counter-productive measures and the erosion of human rights. In fact, people are the solution, not the problem. Experience shows that investing in people, in their rights and choices, is the path to peaceful, prosperous and sustainable societies."

"As we approach November 2022, she said, UNFPA will work with our partners and communities to harness the power of 8 billion as part of our mission to achieve the goals set out in the ICPD Programme of Action back in 1994."

"By protecting the rights and choices of all people to live healthy, empowered lives, humanity holds the key to unleashing the unlimited potential of people around the world to address the challenges threatening their societies and the global problems imperilling us all," Kanem declared.

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