

## **OLDER PEOPLE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Summary**

The world's population is getting older. The principle cause of the higher proportions of older people is a global decline in fertility rates. The transition to an older population is most advanced in the developed world, but in future most older people will be found in Asia and the rest of the developing world. Sustainable development implies stable size of population and therefore older age profile. There is considerable variation between regions, cultures and societies as to the status accorded to old age, the extent to which old age is seen as an issue and the research literature published. In general terms, older people are most commonly amongst the poorest sections of society. Older people are frequently excluded from the benefits of development by institutional mechanisms, for example where customary and traditional means of support are replaced by market mechanisms. Gender and rural-urban migration play a significant part in this social exclusion. The poorest older people are in many societies those in rural areas where many younger people have left for town. There is controversy about the extent to which changing dependency ratios make social welfare, health, and income maintenance provisions sustainable in the long-term. There are also problems with continued reliance on family support in the face of demographic and social change that reduces the availability and willingness of young kin to support older people. Nevertheless families

throughout the world remain the most frequent and most reliable support for people in old age. The article argues that ageism and cultural devaluation of older people will have to be overcome for sustainable development to incorporate all age groups. It is suggested that a re-evaluation of older people's traditional knowledge and skills has the potential for promoting social inclusion and sustainable development.

## **1. Introduction**

This article considers the impact of development and the implications of sustainable development for the older sections of the world's population. The discussion will concern both older people as individuals and older populations. Development cannot be equated solely with economic growth—it must combine the triple objectives of income expansion, social development and environmental protection and regeneration. The objective of sustainable development as 'human well-being' rather than merely economic growth requires a consideration of people in later life as potentially vulnerable to deprivation and social exclusion. Sustainable development also places an emphasis on long-term environmental viability, and thus requires consideration of viable patterns of human demography. Sustainable populations are likely to be older populations.

## **2. Demographic issues**

At various times and in various places people have become concerned about the population, sometimes seeing it as too small, sometimes too large, sometimes growing too rapidly or too slowly or even being too old or too young. For most of the duration of human habitation on the planet, our population has been small and sparsely scattered (four to ten million people at average densities of 2 or 3 per 100 square kilometres). In terms of the full span of human existence we have mostly been hunters and gatherers, and such life styles have been presented as models for long-term sustainable relationships between people and the environment.

But in recent centuries the world population has been growing rapidly. Dramatic acceleration in population growth in last 200 years has been associated with rapid economic change, industrialization, urbanization, and globalization of production and culture. Such rapid economic and demographic change has produced dramatic impacts on the global environment. These impacts have been so large and produced major new risks to all species, including our own, such that many have questioned the sustainability of such growth. The 'demographic timebomb' was seen as the resource depletion, environmental damage, pollution and inhibition to economic growth that accelerating population growth would create. This concern over too many babies led to an almost total invisibility of older people in the development process. Further developmentalist ideologies stressed change and modernity; the new society was the future populated by the young and where the old, i.e. the traditional, were obsolete and destined for oblivion. However, in very recent times the world's population has started to age as a result of the successful diminution of premature mortality and decline in the numbers of babies born on average to each mother. These changes themselves are now raised as a cause of concern, and indeed are also labelled as a 'demographic timebomb'.

### 2.1. Decline in fertility must mean an ageing population.

There has been a major shift towards reduced fertility rates. The United Nation report that by 1995 only 17 countries in the developing world, with less than 4 per cent of the world population, showed no signs of a fertility reduction. In many countries these fertility reductions have been rapid. Even in countries with relatively low fertility rates, fertility has continued to diminish below replacement level. The number of countries with below-replacement fertility is large and increasing. UN figures suggest that by 1995, 44% of the world population lived in countries where fertility was at or below replacement level. Forty-nine countries, including China, were in that position and many of those countries had been experiencing below-replacement fertility for up to twenty years.

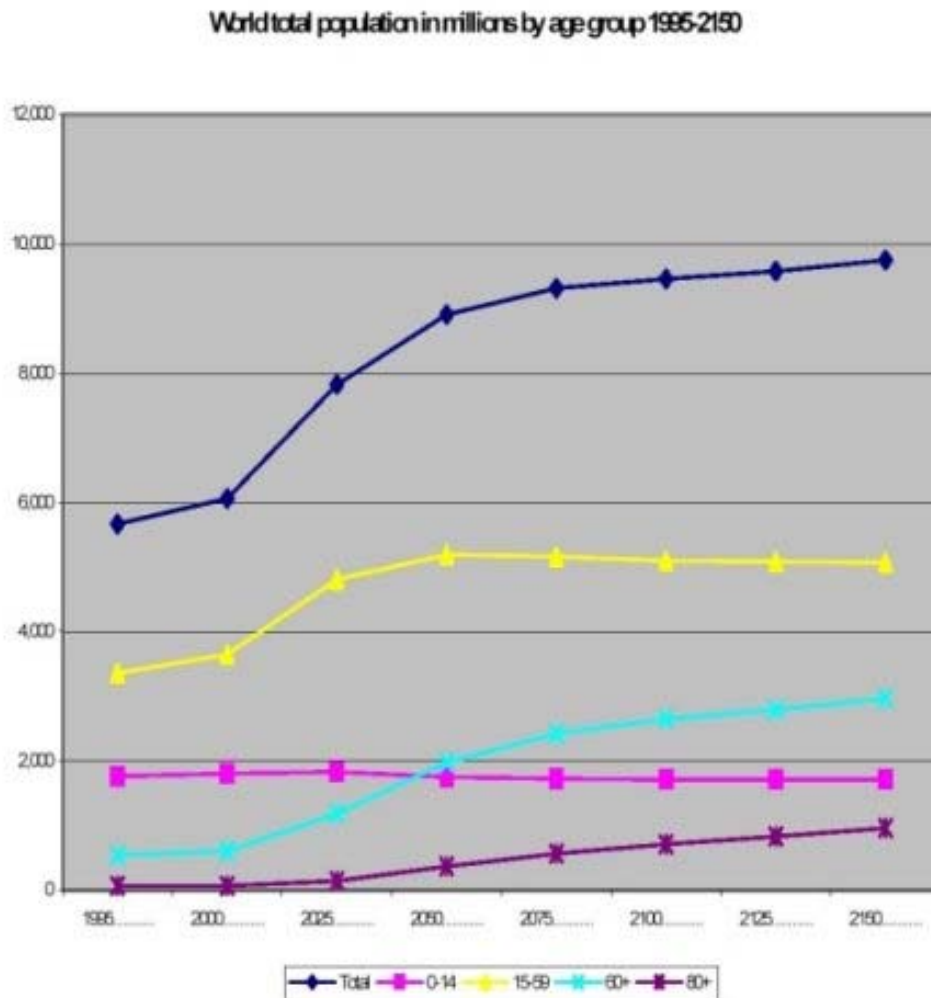


Figure 1. Predicted world population, in millions, by age group, for 1995 to 2150 (author’s analysis using UN data for 1999)

One consequence of the decline in fertility experienced in the developed world and now in the developing world has been population ageing. The average age of populations have been increasing. To some extent this population ageing has been to do with extended life expectancy (particularly associated with declines in infant mortality.

However, primarily it is the result of women having fewer babies than their own mothers. The first half of the twenty-first century will see the population of the world age much faster than has previously been experienced. The median age of the world’s population increased from 23.5 years in 1950 to 26.4 years in 1999. By 2050 the median age is projected to reach 37.8 years (using the United Nations Population Division medium variant population projections). The proportion of children, less than 15 years old, declined from 34% in 1950 to 30% in 1999 while the proportion of older persons, aged 60 or over, increased from 8 to 10% over the same period. The UN Population Division suggests that by 2050, the proportion of children will have declined by one-third of its 1999 level, to 20%, and that the proportion of older persons will have more than doubled, to 22%, exceeding the proportion of children for the first time in human history.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the size and rate of the projected changes in age distribution of the world’s population over the next century and a half.

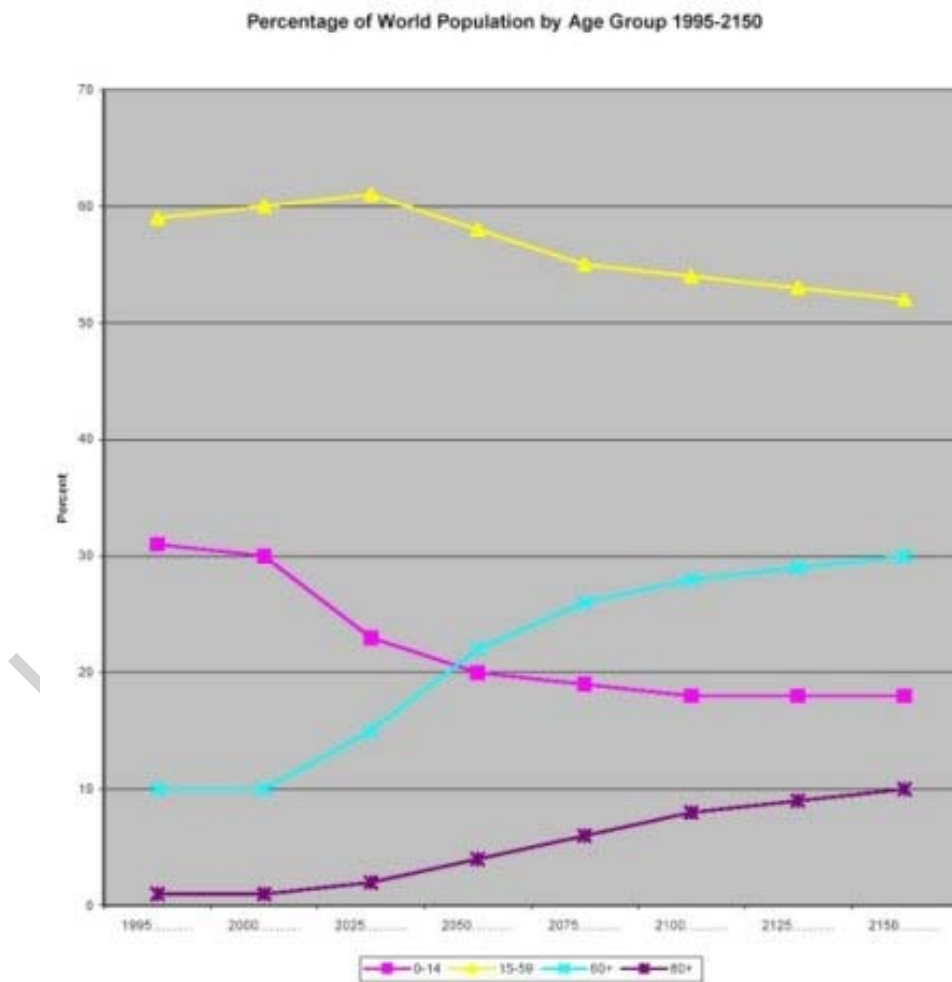


Figure 2. Predicted percentages of world population, by age group, 1995 to 2150

If we examine the longer term projections calculated by UN demographers, they suggest that the world’s population will increase by 4 billion persons between 1995 and 2150,

yet the number of children under fifteen will decline slightly (from 1.8 billion in 1995 to 1.7 billion in 2150). The number of persons aged 15 to 59 years will rise over the same period by 1.7 billion, and the number of people aged 60 years or more will increase by 2.4 billion. These changes imply that the proportion of children will decline from 31% in 1995 to 18% in 2150. In contrast, the proportion of people aged 60 or over will increase threefold, reaching some 30% of the world population in 2150. However, the greater proportion of that change is expected in the first half of the twenty-first century, while subsequently the rates of ageing diminish as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**John Vincent** was born in London in 1947 and educated at Eltham Green Comprehensive. He trained in Social Anthropology, taking a degree in the School of African and Asian Studies at Sussex University. Wrote his Ph.D. and subsequently published on the rural family farmers of the Val d'Aosta in the Italian Alps. Having worked as a social worker and community development worker, he has spent his academic career teaching and researching at Exeter University. He developed his interests in Third World Studies and rural development and has conducted research and written about alpine Italy, Kashmir, Uganda and Bosnia.

Over the last fifteen years he has concentrated in studying and writing about cultural gerontology. He was an elected member of Devon County Council from 1981 to 1989 and pursued his concerns over provision for the elderly. He has conducted empirical research into private residential care for older people in Devon (UK); conducted fieldwork in written on comparative sociology of ageing in Bosnia and Britain; researched the politics of old age in the UK and written on old age and globalisation. His major books on old age are *Inequality and Old Age* (UCL Press 1995) and *Politics, Power and Old Age* (Open University Press 1999), *Politics and Old Age* (Ashgate 2001) and *Old Age* (Routledge 2003).

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