

Editorial

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Since 1950, global population has grown year-on-year without interruption from just under 2.5 billion persons to just over 8 billion persons in 2023. This trend of growth is forecast by the United Nations to continue until 2084 when global population will peak at just under 10.3 billion persons. Underlying this growth, the world has witnessed the ageing of the global population – both at an individual and population level. The proportion of the global population aged 65 years and over has doubled from around 5 per cent in 1950 to 10 per cent in 2023, and it is expected to continue to increase year-on-year throughout the remainder of the 21st century, reaching almost 24 per cent by the year 2100. As part of this ageing, the global life expectancy at birth for both sexes has increased from 46.4 years in 1950 to 73.2 years in 2023, and it is expected to continue to increase, reaching 81.7 years by the year 2100. Similarly, older people are also living longer lives. Global life expectancy for both sexes at age 65 years has increased from 11.4 years in 1950 to 17.6 years in 2023, forecast to reach 21.9 years by the year 2100. An equally important component in the population ageing process the world is experiencing is the dramatic decline in levels of childbearing. Globally, the total fertility rate has declined from 4.85 in 1950 to 2.25 in 2023 – in other words to approximately replacement levels of fertility. The decline is forecast to continue to the end of the 21st century, reaching 1.84 by the year 2100. It is noteworthy that as well as global population growth and ageing (with both a mortality and fertility dimension), the world and each of its continents (excluding Antarctica) is urbanising, with increasing proportions of populations living (by choice or necessity) in urban settings. In 1950, according to the United Nations, just less than 30 per cent of the world's population was living in urban settings. By 2020, the proportion had almost doubled to 56 per cent, and 2050 it is forecast to reach almost 70 per cent. For all governments, communities, families and individuals, this growth, ageing and urbanisation produces challenges and opportunities.

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The early decades of the 21st century have seen global populations continue to age as mortality continued the decline at all ages, which had begun in the early stages of the demographic transition (Leeson 2009, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) and as levels of childbearing remained low (as in Europe and parts of Asia) or continued their transition decline (as in other parts of Asia, Latin America and some parts of Africa) (Vandermotten & Dessouroux 2024). Population ageing – once seen only as a challenge for the developed economies of Europe and North America – has become a truly global phenomenon (Leeson 2013). The only notable exception is sub-Saharan Africa, which remained relatively young in demographic terms (United Nations 2024), but this is also forecast to change.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic which brought about significant mortality increases, especially at older ages (Msemburi et al 2023), levels seem to have returned to their pre-Covid downward trends, and decreases in life expectancy observed during the pandemic have been or are being reversed, albeit slowly (Scholey et al 2022).

As mentioned above, according to the United Nations (2024), the proportion of the global population aged 65 years and over has doubled from around 5 per cent and 126 million in 1950 to 10 per cent and 809 million in 2023, and it is expected to continue to increase year-on-year throughout the remainder of the 21st century, reaching almost 24 per cent more than 2.4 billion by the year 2100. As part of this ageing, the global life expectancy at birth for both sexes has increased from 46.4 years in 1950 to 73.2 years in 2023, and it is expected to continue to increase, reaching 81.7 years by the year 2100. Similarly, older people are also living longer lives. Global life expectancy for both sexes at age 65 years has increased from 11.4 years in 1950 to 17.6 years in 2023, and is forecast to reach 21.9 years by the year 2100. In addition, the proportions for those aged 80 years and over have increased from just 0.6 per cent and 16 million persons in 1950 to around 2 per cent and 160 million persons in 2023, and they are expected to reach almost 5 per cent and 44 million persons by the middle of the 21st century and 9.3 per cent and almost 1 billion persons by 2100. Global increases in life expectancy for both sexes at age 80 years have been significant too, increasing from 5.1 years in 1950 to 8.3 years in 2023, and they are forecast to reach 11.3 years by the year 2100, comparable at that point to life expectancy at age 65 years in 1950.

This amounts approximately to a doubling in both sets of life expectancies (at age 65 and 80 years) in the course of 150 years. While the absolute increases in old age life expectancy are clearly greater at age 65 years (10.5 years from 1950 to 2100 compared with 6.2 years at age 80 years), the proportional increase is higher at age 80 years. Over the period 1950-2100, life

expectancy for both sexes at birth increases by 76 per cent. This compares with 92 per cent at age 65 years and 122 per cent at 80 years.

Clearly, ageing populations are now a challenge and an opportunity for individuals, families, communities and governments around the world. Those working with and for older people need evidence in order to address and harness the power of this ageing.

The first paper in this relaunch of *Ageing Horizons* examines the relationship between different measures of population ageing and public social expenditure in OECD countries. The findings show that population ageing is a key determinant of social expenditure in OECD countries., and the findings underscore the importance of demographic ageing for the size of the welfare state in OECD countries. The paper suggest that in light of the results, policymakers should ensure an adequate level of social support, particularly in the context of a shrinking workforce and an increasing share of older adults.