Fact sheet #12: Age structure

Concepts and definitions

In this section, the term “persons of working age” refers to persons aged from 15 to 64 years. The term “children” refers to persons under the age of 15. The term “older persons” refers to persons aged 65 years or more.

The dependency ratio is defined as the number of children and older persons per hundred persons of working age. It can be expressed as the sum of the child dependency ratio and the old-age dependency ratio.

The child dependency ratio is defined as the number of children per hundred persons of working age.

The old-age dependency ratio is defined as the number of older persons per hundred persons of working age.

Regional distribution of dependency ratios and trends over time

Globally, in 2018, for every 100 persons of working age there were 53 persons who were younger or older. This figure, the dependency ratio, varies considerably across regions. In most economies of Western, Middle and Eastern Africa it is higher than 65 per cent, whereas in Western, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, it is often lower than 45 per cent. Notable exceptions include Japan (67 per cent) and Israel (66 per cent), as well as Yemen (74 per cent), Timor-Leste (73 per cent), Iraq (72 per cent) and economies around the Hindu Kush.

Of the global ratio of 53 per cent, 14 persons per 100 were younger than the working age and 39 were older. The proportion of people under 15 in the population has steadily declined since 1966, from 38 per cent to 26 per cent in 2018, while the proportion of the older than 64 has risen from 5 to 9 per cent. The net effect has been a decline of the dependency ratio from 76 to 53 per cent. The aging of the world population is projected to continue in the next 30 years.
Non-pyramid shape of developed economies’ population pyramid

Looking at population pyramids, we find that in developing economies, older age classes are successively smaller than younger. In developed economies, this pattern is reversed, from age 50 years or less, so that the proportions of older age groups are larger and those of younger age groups smaller than in developing economies.

In both the developing and developed world, women are the majority for older age groups, whereas the majority of children are boys. In 2018, 49.6 per cent of the world population were female.

Less child dependency, more old-age dependency

Over the next 30 years, the total dependency ratio is projected to rise in most regions. Child dependency ratios will decrease, but it is forecast that this effect will be compensated by rising old-age dependency. Africa is the exception, featuring both decreasing child and overall dependency ratios (child: from 73 per cent in 2018 to 52 per cent in 2050, overall: from 79 to 61 per cent). In general, child dependency ratios are projected to fall fastest where they are currently highest.

Contrary to child dependency, old-age dependency is forecast to increase most for the groups of economies where it is already comparatively high, especially in developed economies, where an increase from 30 to 47 per cent is expected by 2050.

For references, see UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2019, annex 6.4.
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#### Selected economies

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### Table 3  
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