

BSAMUN 2026

**Addressing
declining birth
rates and their
strain on other
demographic
groups**

**Economic and Social Council
ECOSOC**

**President Chair: Evie Hodgson
Deputy Chair: Alisa Stoyanova**

Introduction

In recent decades, many countries all over the globe have experienced declining birth rates, leading to significant demographic pattern shifts and age structures within their societies. As fertility rates fall below replacement level, population ageing accelerates, increasing the dependency ratio and therefore placing significantly larger economic and social pressure on the working-age population, healthcare systems, and pension schemes. This issue presents long-term challenges to sustainable development, economic growth, and social stability, making it a key concern for the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Key Terms

Birth Rate - The number of live births per 1,000 people per year.

Fertility Rate - The average number of children a woman is expected to have during her lifetime.

Replacement Rate - A fertility rate of approximately 2.1 children per woman is required to maintain a stable population. (How many children does it take for a couple to replace themselves in the society.)

Ageing Population - An increase in the proportion of elderly people within a population.

Dependency Ratio - The ratio of dependents (children and elderly) to the working-age population.

Demographic Transition - The shift from high birth and death rates to low birth and death rates as a country develops.

Working Age Population - The share of the economically active and economically inactive population, aged from 15 to 64 years old. A basic indicator of potential employment.

General Overview

Declining birth rates have emerged as a major global demographic trend affecting countries across all regions, with fertility levels falling well below the replacement rate of approximately 2.1 births per woman in many parts of the world. According to United Nations data, the global fertility rate has declined significantly over the past decades, decreasing from nearly 5 births per woman in the 1960s to just over 2 today, and is projected to fall below replacement level by mid-century. While this trend first became evident in high-income countries (HICs), it is increasingly visible in East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Africa, demonstrating that declining birth rates pose a threat to social and economic developments worldwide. Fertility rates in OECD countries have fallen from an average of 3.3 children per woman in 1960 to around 1.5 in recent years, with particularly low rates in countries such as South Korea, Italy, and Spain. Similar rapid declines have been observed in countries like Brazil, Thailand, and Iran.

These changes are driven by an intricate combination of factors, including increased access to education and reproductive healthcare, rising female labour force participation, urbanisation, delayed marriage and childbirth, shifting social norms, and the growing financial costs associated with housing, childcare, and raising children. These factors mean many families who wish to have more children are simply financially unable. As fertility rates decline and life expectancy continues to rise, populations are ageing at an unprecedented pace, leading to changes in dependency ratios. This strains social services at the cost of the working class. This impact will be particularly harsh in countries with low levels of immigration. In many developing and middle-income countries (MICs), ageing populations are emerging before the advancement of their economies, further intensifying these struggles.

Major Parties Involved

Low-Fertility Developed Countries: Japan, South Korea, Italy and Germany, among other countries, face some of the lowest fertility rates globally and rapidly ageing populations. They experience shrinking workforces, increased dependency ratios, and pressure on pension and healthcare systems. Many have implemented pronatalist policies, such as financial incentives and parental leave, with mixed success.

Emerging Economies with Rapid Fertility Decline: Countries such as China, Brazil, Thailand and Iran have undergone swift demographic transitions due to urbanisation, rising education levels, and economic development. In many cases, fertility has declined faster than social protection systems have expanded, creating long-term challenges related to ageing before reaching high-income status.

Developing Countries in Demographic Transition: India, Egypt, Indonesia and Mexico are examples of countries that maintain fertility rates near or slightly above replacement levels but are experiencing gradual declines. They must balance investments in youth, employment, and education while preparing for future population ageing and changing labour market demands.

High-Fertility and Young Population Countries: Some countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Nigeria, Niger, and Uganda, continue to experience high fertility rates and youthful populations. While not immediately affected by declining birth rates, they are involved in global demographic discussions due to migration flows, labour mobility, and long-term development planning.

United Nations: Bodies such as the ECOSOC, UNFPA, UNDP, and DESA conduct demographic research, support policy conversations, and assist member states in addressing population dynamics in line with sustainable development goals

Private Sector: As birth rates decline, businesses will be affected by more labour shortages, productivity concerns, and changing workforce demographics, particularly in countries experiencing rapid population ageing.

Working-Age Population: As fertility declines, working-age individuals face increased economic responsibilities, including higher tax burdens and caregiving obligations to support ageing populations.

Elderly Population: Older adults are directly affected by demographic shifts, as pension sustainability, healthcare access, and social support systems become increasingly strained in ageing societies.

Women and Families: Women are central stakeholders, as fertility trends are closely linked to access to education, reproductive healthcare, childcare support, and gender equality in both paid and unpaid labour.

Timeline

1950-1965: Global fertility rates remain high, particularly in the post-World War II “baby boom” period, while improvements in technology and healthcare significantly reduced mortality rates, leading to rapid population growth worldwide.

1968: The first UN International Conference on Human Rights in Tehran formally recognises family planning as a basic human right, influencing future reproductive health policies.

1974: The World Population Conference in Bucharest highlights population growth as a development issue, sparking international debate on fertility, family planning, and economic development.

1980s: Fertility rates begin to decline steadily in many developed countries due to increased access to contraception, higher female educational attainment, and growing workforce participation.

1994: The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo shifts global focus from population control to reproductive rights, health, and individual choice.

1998: Several European and East Asian countries, including Japan and Italy, fall below replacement-level fertility, marking the start of long-term population ageing.

2000: The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) include targets related to maternal health, education, and gender equality, indirectly influencing fertility trends globally.

2008-2009: The global financial crisis contributed to further fertility decline as economic uncertainty led many individuals to delay or forego having children.

2015: The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) links population dynamics to sustainable development, economic growth, and social protection systems.

2020-2021: The COVID-19 pandemic accelerates fertility decline in many countries due to uncertainty, healthcare disruptions, and economic instability.

2023-2025: UN and OECD reports identify declining birth rates as a global demographic challenge, emphasising structural barriers to family formation and the need for long-term, inclusive policy responses.

UN Involvement & Relevant Resolutions

[Resolution 2211 \(XXI\) \(1966\)](#): This General Assembly resolution affirmed the sovereignty of states in formulating and implementing their own population policies, establishing population issues as primarily a national responsibility while recognising the role of international cooperation.

[The World Population Plan of Action \(1974\)](#): Adopted at the first World Population Conference, this plan integrated population policies into broader social and economic development strategies, emphasising the close relationship between demographic trends and quality of life.

[The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development \(ICPD\) \(1994\)](#): The ICPD framework shifted global population policy away from demographic targets toward a rights-based approach focused on reproductive health, gender equality, and individual choice, and remains the core reference for UN population-related action.

[The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development \(General Assembly Resolution 70/1\) \(2015\)](#): The 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals guide current UN responses to demographic change, addressing declining birth rates and population ageing through investment in health, education, decent work, and social protection systems.

[UN Reports](#): The United Nations continuously provides reports through data collection and analysis. This aids with technical support and policy-making assistance. Such reports as this one: United Nations. (n.d.). World demographic trends: Report of the Secretary-General. In Commission on Population and Development (Report E/CN.9/2025/5; pp. 1–18). <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n25/018/52/pdf/n2501852.pdf>

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

1: Financial Assistance

Pronatalist financial incentives such as child allowances, tax benefits, and birth grants have often been insufficient to offset long-term costs of raising children and do not address underlying economic insecurity.

2: Expanded Parental Leave

Implementation has been uneven, and in some cases, reinforced gender imbalances or failed to change workplace cultures.

3: Family-Friendly Labour Policies

Limited implementation due to employer resistance or fear of career penalties, particularly for women.

4: Immigration

The use of immigration to offset labour shortages has often been politically sensitive and has been unable to fully counterbalance ageing populations in the long term.

5: Pension Reform

Reforms to the retirement age, or pensions, have been used to reduce fiscal pressure, but do not address declining birth rates or intergenerational imbalance.

6: Promotion

Public awareness and family-promotion campaigns are often symbolic, with little measurable impact on fertility decisions.

Possible Solutions

Under the World Trade Organisation's TRIPS agreement, nations have the sovereign right to bypass patents during a public health crisis. The global classification of declining birth rates as a public health crisis could allow access to cheaper production of fertility drugs and IVF equipment. This could decrease costs for those who are unable to conceive.

Expanding the right to disconnect to become a human right. This would ban employers from contacting employees outside of work hours. The implementation of this could protect 'family time' as a human right under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Under the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) framework of Decent Work, the UN can establish a new global convention that redefines the standard work week to 32 hours. The international classification of "Productive Employment" as a four-day work week would lower the opportunity cost of parenting.

General Solutions:

- Invest in affordable and accessible childcare, early education, and healthcare services.
- Promote gender equality in caregiving and employment through shared parental leave and workplace reforms.
- Improve economic security for young people, including stable employment opportunities and affordable housing.
- Adapt pension and healthcare systems to better support ageing populations.
- Encourage lifelong workforce participation and skills development.
- Develop responsible and well-managed migration policies where appropriate.
- Strengthen international cooperation through UN frameworks to share best practices and demographic data.

Bibliography

Declining fertility, rising child mortality, surge in international migration, urbanisation significantly shaping global population trends, Commission Hears | Meetings coverage and press releases. (2025, April 10).

<https://press.un.org/en/2025/pop1117.doc.htm>

Somers, C. (2025, November 26). Declining Birth Rates and Their Effect on Future Economics — Simmons Capital Group. Simmons Capital Group.

<https://www.simmonscapitalgroup.com/simmons-blog/declining-birth-rates-and-their-effect>

Radigan, T. (2025). Exploring the implications of a new demographic reality brought on by falling fertility and increasing longevity. In McKinsey Global Institute. McKinsey Global Institute. Retrieved December 14, 2025, from

<https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/dependency-and-depopulation-confronting-the-consequences-of-a-new-demographic-reality>

Social and economic barriers, not choice, driving global fertility crisis: UNFPA. (2025, June 10). UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164176>

OECD (2024), Society at a Glance 2024: OECD Social Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/918d8db3->

Dattani, S., Rodés-Guirao, L., & Roser, M. (2025, February 24). Fertility rate. Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/fertility-rate>

Mertens, W. & IUSSP. (1995). The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD): Context and Characteristics. IUSSP. <https://iusssp.org/sites/default/files/PRP7.pdf>

United Nations. (1995). Programme of action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September, 1994. In United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (ISBN-92-1-151278-6).

https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/files/documents/2020/Jan/un_1995_programme_of_action_adopted_at_the_international_conference_on_population_and_development_cairo_5-13_sept_1994.pdf

Beshay. (2025, August 15). 5 facts about global fertility trends. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/08/15/5-facts-about-global-fertility-trends/>

- McCurry, J. (2025, June 5). Japan records lowest number of births in more than a century, as population fears grow. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/05/japan-records-lowest-number-of-births-in-more-than-a-century-as-population-fears-grow>

The problem with 'too few.' (n.d.). United Nations Population Fund.

<https://www.unfpa.org/swp2023/too-few#:~:text=But%20with%20an%20estimated%20two,'underpopulation'%20are%20increasingly%20common.>