

II. FERTILITY

According to the *2008 Revision*, total fertility—that is, the average number of children a woman would bear if fertility rates remained unchanged during her lifetime—is 2.56 children per woman in 2005-2010 at the world level (table II.1). This average masks the heterogeneity of fertility levels among countries. In 2005-2010, 76 countries or areas (45 of them located in the more developed regions) have fertility levels below 2.1 children per woman, that is, below replacement level⁵, whereas 120 countries or areas (all of which are located in the less developed regions) have total fertility levels at or above 2.1 children per woman. Among these 120 countries, 27 have total fertility levels at or above 5 children per woman, 25 of which are least developed countries (table II.2).

TABLE II.1. ESTIMATED AND PROJECTED TOTAL FERTILITY FOR THE WORLD, MAJOR DEVELOPMENT GROUPS AND MAJOR AREAS, 1970-1975, 2005-2010 AND 2045-2050 ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT VARIANTS

Major area	Total fertility (average number of children per woman)					
	1970-1975	2005-2010	2045-2050			
			Low	Medium	High	Constant
World	4.32	2.56	1.54	2.02	2.51	3.24
More developed regions	2.17	1.64	1.31	1.80	2.30	1.73
Less developed regions	5.18	2.73	1.56	2.05	2.53	3.40
Least developed countries	6.74	4.39	1.93	2.41	2.90	5.04
Other less developed countries	4.97	2.46	1.44	1.93	2.42	2.84
Africa	6.69	4.61	1.91	2.40	2.90	5.06
Asia	4.76	2.35	1.41	1.90	2.40	2.68
Europe	2.19	1.50	1.30	1.80	2.29	1.52
Latin America and the Caribbean	5.01	2.26	1.32	1.82	2.32	2.41
Northern America	2.07	2.04	1.35	1.85	2.35	2.05
Oceania	3.29	2.44	1.49	1.98	2.48	2.79

Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat (2009). *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*. New York: United Nations.

The 76 countries where total fertility is below replacement level in 2005-2010 account for 46 per cent of the world population or approximately 3.2 billion people. Countries with fertility at or above replacement level account for 3.7 billion people or 54 per cent of the world population. Because of their low fertility and the expectation that it will not rise markedly in the future, the countries with below-replacement fertility in 2005-2010 are projected to have only a slightly larger population in 2050 than today. In contrast, the countries whose fertility is currently at or above replacement level are expected to experience a marked population increase, reaching 5.8 billion by 2050 and accounting then for 63 per cent of the world population.

Since, 1974, when the first World Population Conference was held in Bucharest, Romania, fertility has declined by more than 20 per cent in 137 developing countries and by over 50 per cent in 57 of them. The fastest fertility reductions occurred in countries in Asia, including Mongolia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, United Arab Emirates, Viet Nam, the Republic of Korea, Kuwait and Bangladesh. Fertility also declined rapidly in Tunisia and Algeria in Northern Africa and in Mexico in Latin America. The average number of children in those countries is currently below 2.35 children per woman.

⁵ Replacement-level fertility is the level that needs to be sustained over the long run to ensure that a population replaces itself. For most countries having low or moderate mortality levels, replacement level is close to 2.1 children per woman.

TABLE II.2. DISTRIBUTION OF THE WORLD POPULATION AS WELL AS COUNTRIES AND AREAS ACCORDING TO THE LEVEL OF TOTAL FERTILITY IN SELECTED PERIODS* (MEDIUM VARIANT)

Range of total fertility	Percentage of the world population (1 January)					
	1953	1973	1993	2008	2028	2048
Greater or equal to 7.....	5.1	5.5	2.0	0.2	0.0	0.0
Between 6 and less than 7	39.2	14.1	5.5	2.1	0.0	0.0
Between 5 and less than 6	21.7	24.4	5.7	6.6	0.4	0.0
Between 4 and less than 5	1.3	27.0	3.4	6.2	2.1	0.0
Between 3 and less than 4	10.3	2.3	28.8	3.2	11.9	1.6
Between 2.1 and less than 3	22.0	11.9	9.9	35.0	11.0	22.0
Less than 2.1	0.4	14.9	44.7	46.7	74.7	76.3
Total population (millions).....	2 645	3 873	5 505	6 710	8 165	9 079
	Number of countries					
	1950-1955	1970-1975	1990-1995	2005-2010	2025-2030	2045-2050
Greater or equal to 7.....	31	33	6	1	—	—
Between 6 and less than 7	69	50	21	6	—	—
Between 5 and less than 6	36	28	30	20	1	—
Between 4 and less than 5	14	20	25	18	7	—
Between 3 and less than 4	16	14	31	24	26	3
Between 2.1 and less than 3	25	33	30	51	43	46
Less than 2.1	5	18	53	76	119	147
Total number of countries	196	196	196	196	196	196

Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat (2009). *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*. New York: United Nations.

*NOTE: Refers only to countries or areas with 100,000 persons or more in 2009.

Although most developing countries are already far advanced in the transition from high to low fertility, seven countries still have fertility levels of 6 children per woman or higher in 2005-2010 and in Niger total fertility is greater than 7 children per woman (table II.2 and table A.13). Although the fertility of those seven countries is projected to decline after 2010 at a pace of about one child per decade, none is expected to reach 2.1 children per woman by 2045-2050 in the medium variant. As a result, their population is expected nearly to triple, passing from 159 million in 2008 to 425 million in 2050.

These seven countries are least developed countries—Afghanistan, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, Somalia, Timor-Leste and Uganda—and several are highly affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Moreover, a number of them have been experiencing civil strife and political instability in recent years, factors that militate against the provision of basic services for the population. The continuation of rapid population growth poses serious challenges to their future development.

Despite the important contribution to population growth of high-fertility countries (those with a total fertility above 6 children per woman), they account today for less than 2 per cent of the world population and are expected to constitute 4 per cent of the world population by 2050, according to the medium variant. Countries with total fertility ranging from 4 to 6 children per woman account today for 13 per cent of the world population (table II.2).

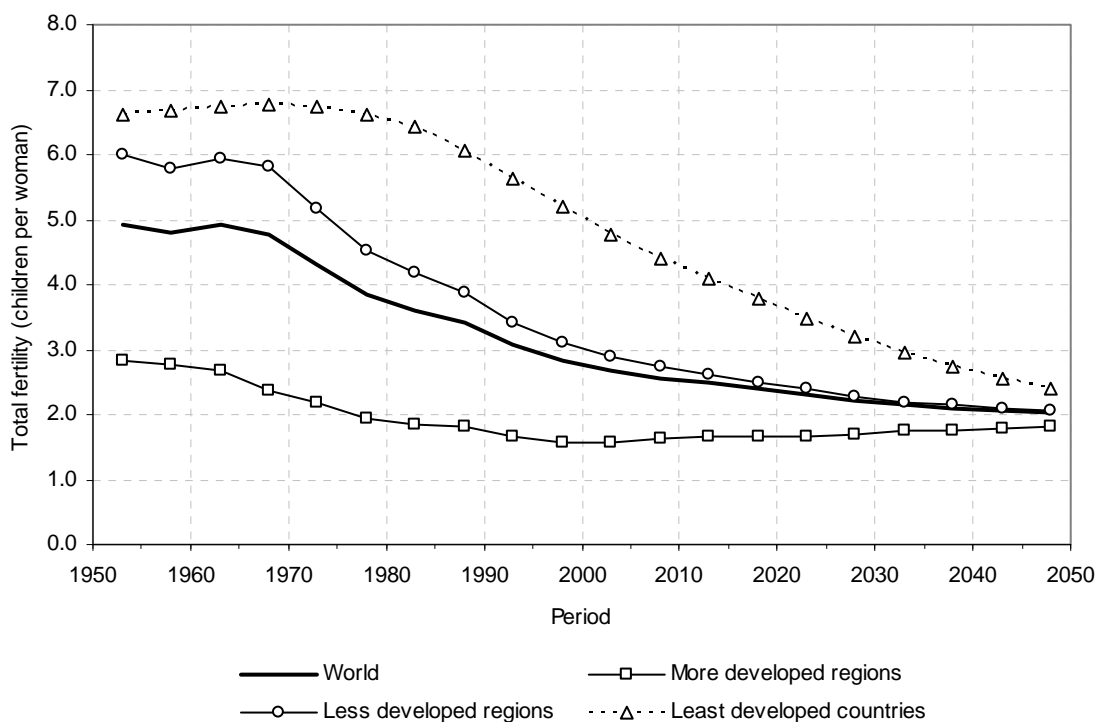
In 2009, the majority of people in the developing world live in the 76 countries with total fertility ranging from 2.1 to 4 children per woman, which account for 41 per cent of the world population. Most of

those countries are projected to have a total fertility below replacement level by 2045-2050, according to the medium variant. Overall, 147 countries or areas are projected to have below-replacement fertility in 2045-2050, with 124 having a total fertility equal to or lower than 1.85 children per woman. As a result, according to the medium variant, 77 per cent of the world population is expected to live in countries with below-replacement fertility in 2045-2050.

Fertility levels in developed countries, many of which experienced a “baby-boom” during the 1950s and 1960s, have generally declined since the early 1970s to below-replacement level. In fact, in 1970-1975, 18 countries out of the 45 developed countries in the world already had below-replacement fertility. By 2005-2010, all developed countries had reached fertility levels below 2.1 children per woman. Among them, 6 had reached historically unprecedented low fertility levels (below 1.3 children per woman), with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Malta and Japan exhibiting the lowest levels in the developed world.

At the world level, the medium variant projects total fertility to be 2.02 children per woman in 2045-2050 (table II.1), the result of 1.80 children per woman in the more developed regions and 2.05 children per woman in the less developed regions. That is, although the difference in total fertility between the more and the less developed regions narrows considerably by mid-century, the less developed regions are still expected to have a higher total fertility than the more developed regions. That difference persists in all projection variants. Total fertility in the low variant is expected to be 1.31 children per woman in the more developed regions and 1.56 children per woman in the less developed regions. In the high variant, total fertility is projected to be 2.30 children per woman in the more developed regions and 2.53 children per woman in the less developed regions.

Figure 3. Total fertility trajectories for the world and the major development groups, 1950-2050 (medium variant)



Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat (2009). *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*. New York: United Nations.