



Executive Summary

*“There are three important things in history: first, numbers; second, numbers; and third, numbers”.*¹

Demography - the statistical study of human populations - has always fascinated and been subject to forecasts and interpretations. **It holds**

a prominent role in all key contemporary societal issues: resources, climate, conflicts, migration, urbanization, growth, education, employment, pension, health, etc.

For these debates to be rationalized, it is essential to start with facts, figures and a precise analysis of demographic trends, so as to better anticipate future changes in the world population. This is the whole purpose of this paper: **how do we grasp the current period, which is exceptional from a demographic point of view?** And more importantly, what are the foreseeable consequences of coming transformations?

The importance of demography

11.18 billion: according to the UN, this is the number of human beings who will populate the Earth by 2100. Such a figure, while it ought to be approached with caution, must not be ignored. The world population may now only be growing by 1.1% per year, but many countries still have young and rapidly growing populations.

The first decade of our century was a turning point in human history. Senior citizens (over 60 year olds) now outnumber children (0-4 year olds). Urban dwellers now outnumber rural ones.

These global trends conceal significant disparities between two universes: that of aging powers on the one hand (mainly in Eurasia), and that of the youngest countries on the other (in Africa in particular).

A demographic revolution with serious consequences

These various demographic changes have major consequences in many other fields - geopolitics, energy, migration, religion, etc. - which must be analyzed in detail.

First, **the world demographic evolution will not be without consequences for the hierarchy of global powers.** The relationship between population growth and economic growth is not univocal, and today, a large population does not necessarily mean a powerful military force. Yet psychology plays an important role in the hierarchy of powers. India is very proud to soon become the first country in the world demographically speaking. The fact that France will be close to catching up with Germany (70 vs. 79 million inhabitants) by 2050 will not be completely innocuous.

Second, **the global increase in population inevitably raises the question of resources:** will our planet be able, in coming decades, to meet the needs of all humans, no matter how many of them there are? The answer tends to be positive. Discoveries, technical progress and changes in consumption habits, but also costs - an extraordinarily efficient adjustment factor - are enabling the Earth to be resilient to demographic changes and will continue to do so. The agricultural sector's productivity is constantly increasing: malnutrition is proven to result from political inefficiency and conflict, rather than from a lack of resources.

A “crescent of crisis” around Europe

The distribution of crises and conflicts reveals a **“crescent of crisis” going from sub-Saharan Africa to South Asia.** The majority of countries that have not completed their demographic transition are also located within this crescent. **Yet there is a link between demographic change and political violence.** According to recent studies, in a given country, a very high proportion of young adults can increase this country's chances of experiencing episodes of collective violence. Indeed, the vast majority of civil wars since the 1970s occurred in countries with such demographics (Rwanda, Kosovo or the Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Libya,

¹ *The Decline of the American Empire*, a film by Denys Arcand, 1986.

etc.). According to this argument, the probability is low that countries such as the Sahel States, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen or Pakistan will become peaceful in the next 20 to 25 years.

Unavoidable migrations?

Humanity is becoming increasingly mobile. Today, 257 million people live elsewhere than in their country of origin. The amount of emigrants has thus tripled since the 1970s: they used to represent 3.3% of the world population in 2015, against 2.2% in 1975. The UN predicts that between 2015 and 2050, the hierarchy of the main immigration countries (United States, Germany, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia) and emigration countries (India, Bangladesh, China, Pakistan, Indonesia) will vary very little from the current situation.

Extreme poverty is an obstacle to emigration, because the lack of capital prevents individuals from considering to leave. Development thus tends to increase rather than decrease, migration flows up to a certain income level. However, **while emigration is facilitated today, so are returns.** Therefore, after the annual net intercontinental migration rate increased between 1980 and 2010, it decreased from 2010 to 2015.

The natural increase in of the African continent's population will not automatically translate into an increase in migration to Europe. **Africa is the continent with the lowest migration flows in proportion to its overall population** (and Africans represent only a small minority of Europe's population). However, some global trends are concerning: the Sahel could be qualified as a "demographic bomb". Forecasts suggest there will be significant migration towards West Africa. Thus, while prospects for African immigration to Europe are hardly a nightmare prophecy, European countries must be fully aware that it will be a crucial parameter of the continent's demographic future.

Could climate change lead to a global increase in migration? This is indeed likely. But here again, one must remain

cautious. Environmental displacement is generally progressive and depends on economic opportunities elsewhere. **The IPCC² itself challenges the very relevance of the concept of "climate refugees".**

Eurasia: a societal challenge

In coming decades, **Eurasian countries (Europe, Russia, East Asia) will face major societal challenges** linked to their demographic transformations. The increase in the pension burden will be particularly significant in Northeast Asia and Southern Europe. Immigration, which is sometimes presented as the solution to this problem, cannot solve everything: its long-term economic effect is subject to debate.

Demographic transformations and migration occurring in Russia and the United States are also altering the composition of both countries. In Asia, the "surplus of men" in countries like China will raise key societal issues, and will, at times, have unintended consequences.

Conclusion

Forecasts are very good at providing food for thought. They are not deterministic, but demography as a field makes great use of foresight.

Some optimism may be in order for 2050 and beyond. For example, there is a strong correlation between median age and democracy. The completion of the demographic transition in the majority of countries suggests that **collective violence will decrease and give way to a more peaceful global society.**

In the very long term - around 2100 - the terrestrial population could stabilize at circa two children per woman, all continents combined, and life expectancy at birth could reach beyond 80 years. **Yet this new equilibrium remains a mere hypothesis, as it has never been observed before.**

²The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.