

ICPD25: KEY TRENDS IN THE UNECE REGION



1. Important gains have been made in implementing the ICPD Programme of Action, but gaps remain

The UNECE region has witnessed significant progress in implementing the ICPD Programme of Action, adopted 25 years ago, in 1994. Examples of this include greater access to sexual and reproductive health care, reduced maternal mortality, increased life expectancy, and advances in gender equality and women's empowerment. The countries of the eastern part of the region generally still lag behind in progress towards achieving ICPD goals, including on issues such as life expectancy, especially of men, use of modern contraceptives, combatting HIV, and reducing teenage pregnancy and child marriage.

2. The region's population is expected to continue to grow, but some countries are experiencing negative population growth

The UNECE region's population has increased over the past 25 years, and is projected to continue to grow. By 2030, it will be 16% larger than in 1994. The eastern part of the region will also see further population growth overall, albeit at a slower pace. Twenty countries, many of them in Eastern Europe, will see their populations decline by 2030, and many governments are concerned about the negative impact of this decline – and of population ageing – on the economy, social systems, infrastructure, and even national security.

3. Outmigration and low fertility are key factors for shrinking populations

The region's average total fertility rate was estimated at 1.8 children per woman of reproductive age in 2015, and it is below replacement level in 49 of the 56 UNECE countries. In the western part of the region, immigration tends to compensate for low fertility and populations continue to grow. In the eastern part, low fertility is often coupled with a negative migration balance, as large numbers of people – often young people of reproductive age – leave their countries to look for opportunities elsewhere.

4. Populations are ageing across the region

Persons aged 65 years and older accounted for 13% of the region's total population in 1994, 15% in 2015 and an estimated 21% by 2030. Life expectancy has increased for both men and women across the region and reached an average of 75 years for men and 81 years for women in 2015. In the eastern part of the region, life expectancy among men, while also improving, is still up to 10 years lower than among women in some countries, largely due to lifestyle-related illnesses.

5. Non-communicable diseases have become a major challenge

While countries that experience ageing and low fertility are increasingly worried about their ability to sustain pension systems, the costs arising from non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases far exceed the economic loss due to declining numbers of working-age population. Healthy ageing can help sustain the advances in well-being achieved over the past 25 years.

6. Modern contraceptive use has increased, but remains low in parts of Eastern Europe

In Europe, the use of modern contraceptives has increased from 51% in 1994 to 61% in 2019, and is projected to see a slight further increase by 2030. However, in parts of Eastern Europe, especially in South-Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, usage rates have remained at far lower levels, generally even below the rate in world's least developed countries (42%), as persistent myths and misperceptions still make people rely on less effective traditional methods.

7. Sexuality education is becoming the norm, but there are big implementation gaps

Many countries in the UNECE region have provisions in place for sexuality education, recognizing that giving young people the skills and knowledge they need will protect them from early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and abusive relationships. But a recent study in 25 UNECE Member States found that of the 21 countries with some legal basis for sexuality education, only 11 made the subject mandatory, and in only 10 can it be considered comprehensive under international standards.

8. Teenage pregnancy is on the decline, but remains high in the eastern part of the region

Teenage pregnancy has been on the decline since 1994 in all UNECE countries, except Azerbaijan, and is expected to further decrease by 2030. As early pregnancy is a health risk and often leads to girls dropping out of education, this trend has opened up opportunities for millions of girls and young women. But teenage pregnancy remains more common in parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where traditional gender norms and lack of sexuality education are among the factors preventing the gap between the eastern and western parts of the region closing at a faster pace.

9. Various forms of violence against women and girls are widespread across the region

Gender-based violence, especially violence against women and girls, is pervasive across the region. While there is no comparable data showing trends for the entire region, a recent UNFPA-supported survey in eight countries and territories in Eastern Europe revealed that 70% of women have experienced some form of violence, and 31% suffered physical and/or sexual violence. Harmful practices like child marriage and gender-biased sex selection remain common in some countries.

10. Traditional gender norms hinder progress towards achieving ICPD goals

Traditional gender norms persist to varying degrees across the region and severely curtail women's abilities to make their own choices and shape their own lives free from discrimination and violence. As a result, many countries in the region are not able to make full use of the talent and potential of significant parts of their societies. Data shows that more gender-equal countries perform better economically and are better equipped to tackle demographic challenges such as low fertility or population ageing.