

THE EFFECTS OF A VERY YOUNG AGE STRUCTURE IN YEMEN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

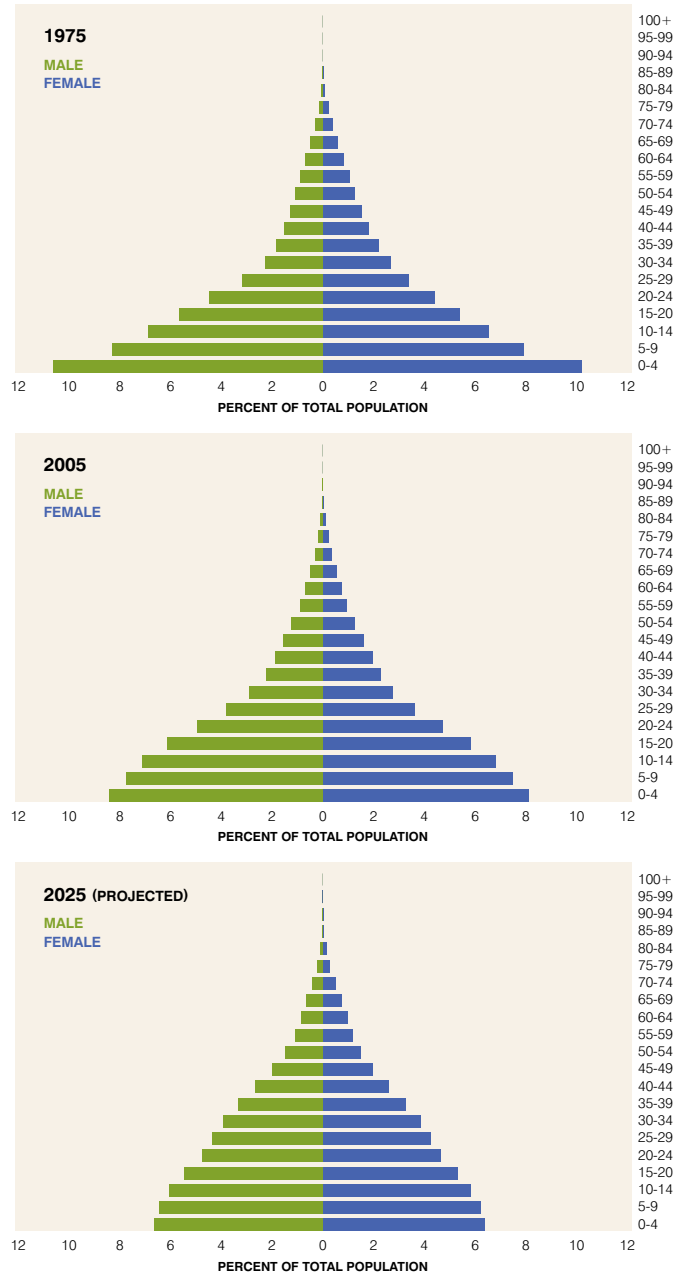
Yemen has broken into the global political scene, with periodic terrorist attacks against foreign targets and its location as a base for al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula highlighting the country's geopolitical significance. Yemen has the most youthful age structure in the world outside of sub-Saharan Africa, and its demographic situation is acknowledged by its government and external partners alike as a major challenge to the country's continued development.

Since 1980, Yemen's population has nearly tripled, from 8.4 million to 21 million. Women in Yemen have an average of 6.2 children. If this fertility level stays constant, Yemen is projected to have a population of 39 million by 2025. An important influence on high fertility is the proportion of women who wish to prevent or delay their next birth but are not using family planning. Fifty-one percent of married women in Yemen are estimated to have an unmet need for family planning—the highest level, by far, in the world.

Despite cultural challenges, programs already in place have successfully partnered with religious and political leaders to promote reproductive health. However, there are concerns about how well relevant national policies are being implemented. In a tremendously difficult political and economic context, the government must yet prove its political will.

The implications of population growth for infrastructure, education, health care and employment are daunting: Yemen would require 500,000 new teachers and 16,000 new doctors by 2050 just to maintain the status quo. Per capita income is less than \$900 a year, nearly half of the population lives in poverty, and by some estimates, more than one-third of adults are unemployed. In this decade, economic growth has been stagnant and unemployment is rising. Most of Yemen's oil reserves—relied upon for 70 percent of government revenue—have been extracted and could be depleted entirely in less than a decade. Given Yemen's current age structure, where youth represent three-quarters of the population, there must be a strong focus on human capital, with intensive investments in education and health, if the country is to benefit from future potential offered by continued progress through the demographic transition.

FIGURE 1. YEMEN'S AGE STRUCTURES



The United Nations recommends that Yemen could reverse its stagnant progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals by “harnessing the energy of its youth,” focusing particularly on improving the status of women, increasing access to health and education, raising economic growth rates with a focus on employment levels, and making water use sustainable and efficient. With the labor force currently growing at a rate about one percent a year higher than that of available jobs, unemployment levels among young people could reach 40 percent in the next decade.

Yemen’s very young age structure is deeply tied to its security as well. In 2007, Population Action International (PAI) published *The Shape of Things to Come: Why Age Structure Matters to a Safer, More Equitable World*. The report found that population age structure can influence a country’s stability, governance and the well-being of its people. Countries with very young and youthful age structures—those in which 60 percent or more of the population is younger than age 30—are the most likely to face outbreaks of civil conflict and autocratic governance. In recent years, Yemen’s security situation has only worsened, with growing concern that the country’s stability has reached a “tipping point.” Apart from the activities of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen faces both secessionist struggles in the south and a civil war with rebels in the north that has spilled into Saudi Arabia and generated growing humanitarian repercussions. While operating as a technical democracy, the government maintains a strong centralist orientation, though its reach is limited by the strength of tribal authorities, whose long-standing preference to maintain their autonomy is reinforced by the perception of a weak and corrupt government.

Yemen also has the lowest ranking in the world in a global survey of gender equity, based on the country’s share of women in high-level professional positions, conducting economic activity and attaining education relative to men. About half of young women in Yemen are married before the age of 20, and fewer than half of girls ages six to 11 in rural areas are enrolled in school, despite the country’s constitutional mandate for basic education.

Finally, worsening natural resource shortages, particularly water scarcity, demonstrate some of the most obvious current implications of Yemen’s population growth. The country is facing not only severe projected impacts of climate change, with extended droughts and declining agricultural productivity, but also limited resilience to cope with such changes due in part to low levels of economic development and reliance on a few commodities, both of which may be compounded by population growth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve Yemen’s long-term development goals, PAI recommends that the United States government, working in coordination with Yemen’s government, other donors and in-country civil society partners:

- 1 Increase investments in family planning and reproductive health, including meeting the needs of youth.**
- 2 Increase and strengthen educational and economic development opportunities for large youth cohorts, with a focus on improving female participation.**
- 3 Include age structure and broader demographic factors in efforts to foster political stability and security.**
- 4 Support policies and programs that promote gender equity and advance the legal rights of and economic opportunities for women.**
- 5 Develop and fund integrated approaches to climate change adaptation and environmental sustainability that include family planning and reproductive health.**

Full report on PAI’s website www.populationaction.org

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME SERIES

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