

Implications of Demographic Change in Least Developed Countries

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Abstract: Demographic changes are one of the determinants shaping the global economy. Due to the growing population, the analysis of demographic changes in developed and developing countries is crucial. The aim of the article was to identify changes in the demographic structure of the least developed countries, and to assess the impact of demographic trends on the world economy. The study examines selected demographic trends in the least developed countries, including positive population growth, increase in life expectancy and in the number of children aged 0-14. The possible consequences for population growth in LDCs were also indicated. Based on the analysis of the literature and quantitative data, a possible increase in net migration from the LDCs and the probability of cultural problems in the host countries were identified. The research methods used in the article were the analysis of the literature and the method of inference.

Keywords: LDCs, demographics, population.

1. Introduction

The systematic growth of the population observed over the years has been identified as one of the influential megatrends shaping the current global economy. Changes in demographics occur at different times and spaces, as can be clearly seen after analysing particular data. The diversity in demographic trends can be seen through the ageing population in certain regions and rapid population growth in others, primarily influenced by the varying levels of development across countries.

The aim of this article was to analyse the evolving demographic patterns in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and their potential impact on the global economy. To achieve this objective, the following research questions were formulated: What are the potential risks associated with a young population in LDCs? How might demographic changes in LDCs influence developed countries? The research methods employed in this study included literature analysis and the inference method. Reliable quantitative data from reputable sources such as the World Bank, UNCTAD, and the WTO, among others, were utilised in the analysis.

2. Least Developed Countries (LDCs)

For the purpose of this study, the research utilised the country classifications provided by the UNCTAD approach. These classifications categorise countries based on their level of development (developed and developing countries). Within the developing country category, there exists a subgroup known as *Least Developed Countries* (LDCs), which includes 46 countries as of 2023. The current definition of LDCs, according to the United Nations, is as follows: “low-income countries that face major structural obstacles to sustainable development [...]” (European Commission, 2023).

Structural obstacles encompass a range of issues, such as inadequate healthcare access, limited educational opportunities, and high levels of corruption. Failing to address basic population needs exacerbates the problems of poverty and unemployment. Taking into account the term ‘low-income countries’, reference should be made to the criteria of belonging to the LDC group. According to the income criterion mentioned earlier, countries that maintain a gross national income per capita of less than \$1018 for three consecutive years qualify for classification as an LDC. The above definition should also clarify the concept of sustainable development, which is defined by the UN as: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 2023a). Achieving sustainable development can pose significant challenges for the least developed countries, such as high mortality rates, low literacy and high poverty rates, and a low share of services in total employment. To guide progress and identify areas for improvement, the international community has formulated 17 Sustainable Development Goals, addressing crucial issues such as poverty, hunger, climate change, and sanitation. Each goal achieved by the least developed countries represents a significant milestone towards further development. Data released by the United Nations demonstrates the impact that accomplishing specific goals can have, such as addressing malnutrition in developing countries and improving access to clean, safe water.

UNCTAD, in addition to LDCs, also distinguished LLDCs (Landlocked Developing Countries) and SIDS (Small Island Developing States) (UNCTADstat, 2023). The above classification was created in 1971 by the United Nations. In 2023 the LDC group includes countries from the regions of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific, see Table 1.

Table 1. Countries belonging to the LDC group in 2023

Region	Country
Caribbean	Haiti
Pacific	Kiribati, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands
Asia	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, East Timor, Yemen
Africa	Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia

Source: (UNCTAD, 2023).

Table 1 shows the dominance of countries from (Africa – 33 countries) and Asia (9 countries). This is, among other things, due to the consent given by the above countries to belong to the group and to meet the three criteria (income, economic and environmental vulnerability, human resources) (United Nations, 2023b). It is worth emphasising that countries potentially belonging to the least developed countries may not agree to be classified as such. On the other hand, inclusion in the group depends on three criteria. The results obtained by the countries are the basis for classification or leaving the LDC group. Table 2 shows the current criteria that determine the possibility of belonging to the group. The countries’ scores are calculated on the basis of selected indicators that reflect the state of development of the economy. A country review is carried out every three years, both for classified countries that

can leave the group after meeting the criteria, and for countries that are eligible for inclusion (United Nations, 2023b). Over the years, six countries have left the group: Maldives, Botswana, Samoa, Cape Verde, Vanuatu and Equatorial Guinea (UNCTAD, 2023).

Table 2. Criteria for inclusion/leaving the LDC group

Criteria			LDC	Other countries
Human Assets Index (HAI)	Health indicator	Mortality rate for children under the age of five	60 or less	66 or more
		Maternal mortality rate		
		Prevalence of dwarfism		
	Education indicator	Gross enrollment rate in secondary schools		
		Adult literacy rate		
Gender parity index for gross secondary school enrollment				
Economic and environmental sensitivity index	Economic sensitivity index	Share of agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing in GDP	32 and less	36 and more
		Remoteness and lack of access to the sea		
		Concentration of exports of goods		
		Instability of exports of goods and services		
	Environmental sensitivity index	Share of the population in low-lying coastal zones		
		Percentage of the population living in dry lands		
		Instability of agricultural production		
		Disaster victims		
National income per capita			\$1018 or less	\$1,222 or more

Source: (United Nations, 2023b).

Belonging to the LDC category brings both opportunities and challenges. The decision to be included on the list of the least developed countries has far-reaching consequences for the economies. An example of the benefits is being a beneficiary of the LDCF fund, whose primary goal is to prepare economies for environmental changes, including climate change, as well as to make countries more resilient to climate-related threats (Climate Funds Update, 2023). Additionally, LDCs can enjoy preferential market access treatment, particularly from entities like the European Union. Aid programmes also provide valuable support to these nations. However, joining the group of LDCs is also associated with the image of being an underdeveloped country facing obstacles to development and a poor country with low incomes. The consequences can be seen in a drop in the number of tourists visiting the country and/or a deterioration in international relations.

3. Demographic Trends in LDCs

Demographic changes have displayed a consistent upward trajectory over the years. The United Nations predicts that the global population will reach 9.7 billion by 2050, representing an increase of 1.7 billion from 2023 (United Nations, 2022). This growth can be attributed to factors such as favourable birth rates in developing nations and improved life expectancy worldwide. When analysing the average life expectancy of men and women in terms of the number of years, countries such as Hong Kong, Macau, Iceland and Japan stand out with the longest life expectancy of their inhabitants (WorldData, 2023).

Taking into account the importance of regions for the life expectancy of inhabitants, the dominance of Australia and New Zealand is clear, with the achieved highest values (women: 85, men: 81.05)

(WorldData, 2023). In contrast, the group of LDCs is characterized by relatively low life expectancy values. In 2020, life expectancy was 65 years (World Bank, 2023a). However, it should be underlined that the improvement over the years is noticeable. In 2000, life expectancy was 56 years, and a decade later it exceeded 61 years (The World Bank, 2023a). Analysing the median age in 2018-2022, this was as follows: 18.8; 18.9; 19.1; 19.2; 19.3 (United Nations, 2023c). Despite the upward trend in the median age and the increase in life expectancy, it is clear that the population of LDCs is young, and its age pyramid is significantly different from the ageing countries (e.g. Japan). This has both benefits and risks for low-income countries.

3.1. Population Natural Increase

When analysing the population, particular attention should be paid to the fertility and mortality rate. Regarding the average fertility rate (number of births per woman) for 46 LDC countries, in 2020 it reached the value of 4.00, which is a decrease compared to 2010 by 0.6 (The World Bank, 2023b). The highest number of births per woman among the LDCs in 2020 was recorded in Niger (6.9), Somalia (6.4) and Chad (6.3). Globally, the above ratio in 2020 was 2.3 (The World Bank, 2023b). This means that, on average, in the least developed countries, the number of births per woman is 1.7 higher than the global average. The above data are worth comparing with LDCs which achieved the lowest fertility rate in 2020, i.e. Bhutan (1.4), Bangladesh (2.0) and Nepal (2.1) (The World Bank, 2023b). This proves the diversification of the fertility rate in the group of the least developed countries.

The second important parameter in the demographic analysis is the mortality rate of newborns, infants and children under 5 per 1,000 live births (Figure 1). Despite the downward trend from 1990 to 2021, there is a noticeable problem reflecting the difficulties of the economies in both health and education. The mortality rate for children under five remains high. According to the World Bank, in 2021 it was 61 (per 1,000 live births) (2023c), while the infant mortality rate is lower – in 2021 it amounted to 25.1 (The World Bank, 2023c). There was a significant improvement after 1990, when it recorded a value of 52. At the same time, it is worth remembering that an increase in the number of births may reduce access to healthcare and affect the mortality rate.

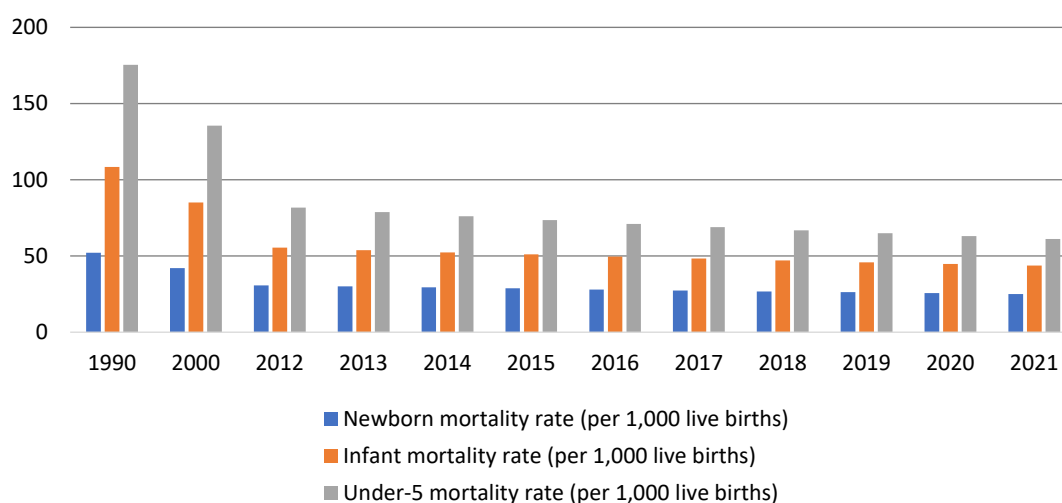


Fig. 1. List of mortality rates for newborns, infants and children under 5 per 1000 live births in LDCs in 1990-2021

Source: own study based on (The World Bank, 2023c).

When comparing data presenting the number of population over the years, a rapid increase in population in LDCs can be seen (The World Bank, 2023d). This is a consequence of the reduction

in mortality and high fertility rates. In 2021, in 46 countries belonging to the above group, the population was 1.1 billion, which means an increase compared to 2018 by 0.05 billion (Figure 2) (The World Bank, 2023e). The most populous country in 2021 was Bangladesh (169,356,251), followed by Ethiopia (120,283,026) (The World Bank, 2023e). Analysing the rate of population change (median), a range of 2.3 to 2.5 is visible (Table 3). The data cited indicate a significant distinction in the dynamics of demographic change, particularly when comparing developed countries with other regions.

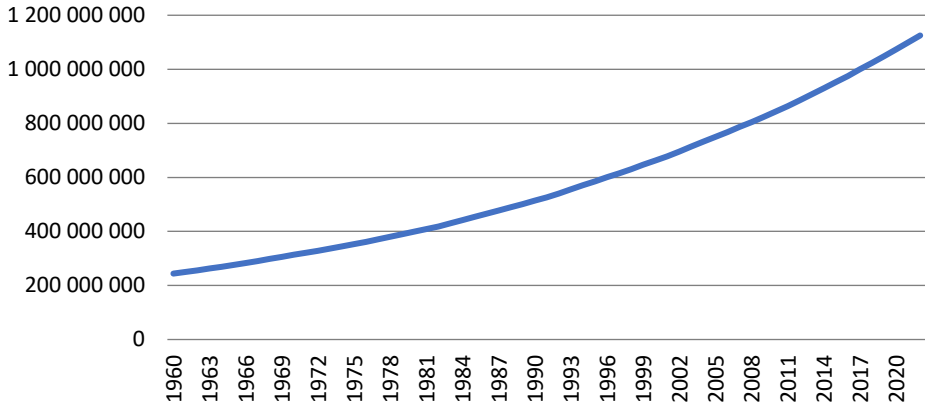


Fig. 2. Population in LDCs, 1960-2021

Source: (The World Bank, 2023e).

Table 3. Rate of change in the population of LDCs in 2015-2022 (in %)

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Rate of population change	2.4	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.3

Source: (United Nations, 2023c).

The years 1990-2021 were a period in which the birth rate ranged from 2.4% to 2.5% (United Nations, 2023c). This indicates regularities related to population growth in LDCs. The rate of natural increase remained at an almost unchanged level for years, which resulted in a huge increase in population. According to a United Nations report, it is estimated that about half of the population growth in 2050 will be observed in just eight countries (UN DESA, 2022) – as many as four of them belong to the group of the least developed countries (Ethiopia, Niger, Tanzania, Congo)¹.

3.2. Young Society

When examining overall data related to the demographics of LDCs, it is crucial to take into account the distribution of age groups within their populations. By analysing factors such as fertility rates and life expectancy, one can observe that LDCs tend to have a predominantly young population. This phenomenon is commonly observed in developing countries that have yet to attain a satisfactory level of overall well-being.

An important indicator for evaluating the age composition of a society is the proportion of the population within the age range of 0-14. The higher the percentage, the wider the base of the age pyramid.

¹ As of 2023.

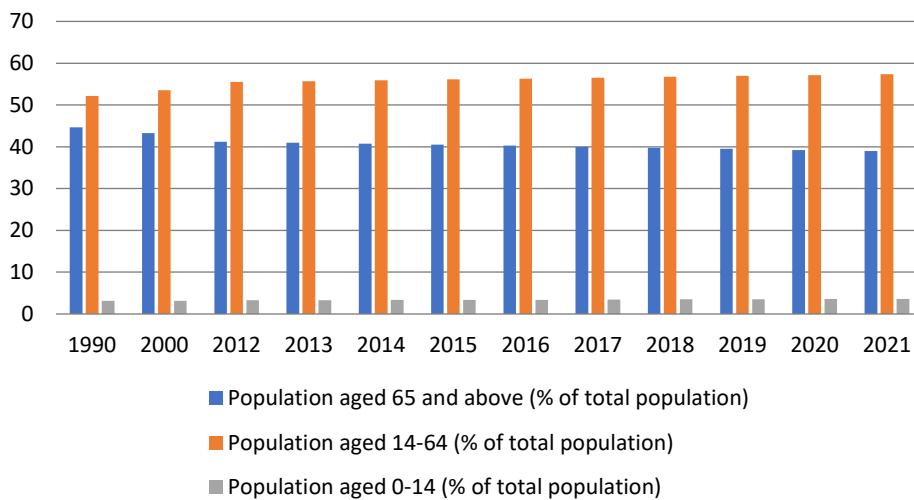


Fig. 3. Breakdown of the population by age groups for the group of LDCs in 1990-2021 (in %)

Source: own study based on (The World Bank, 2023f).

Three age groups are shown in Figure 3. What distinguishes young societies from ageing ones is the share of the population aged 0-14. In 2021, for LDCs it was 39%. The above value can be compared with the oldest society in the world, which in this range reached a population share of 11.8% , i.e. Japan (The World Bank, 2023g). The above inequalities are due, among other things, to different degrees of development.

To show the differences in the demographics of LDCs and developed countries, one can use the age pyramid of Japan (a developed country) and Ethiopia (a least developed country (as of 2023)).

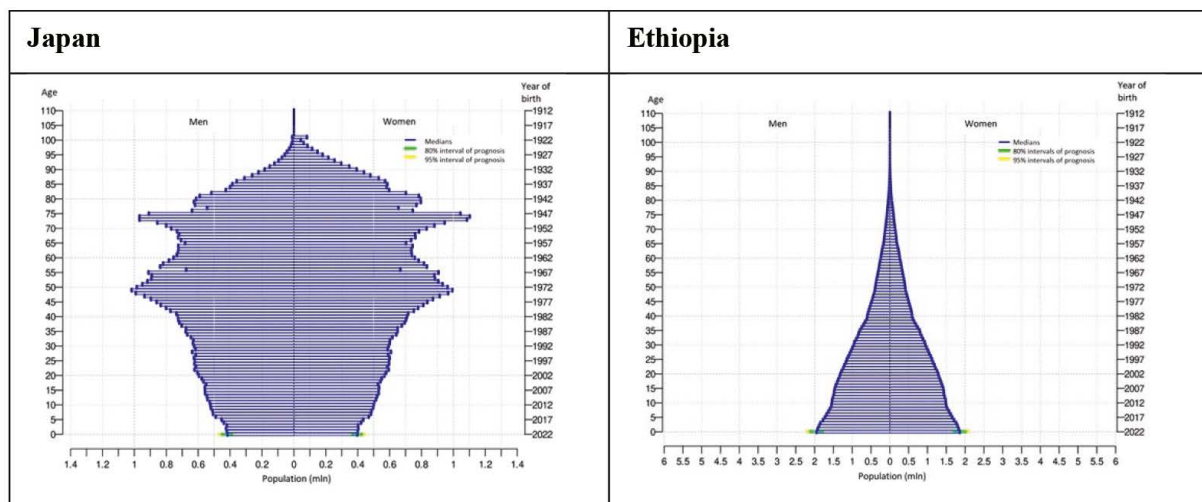


Fig. 4. Comparison of the age pyramid of Japan and Ethiopia in 2023

Source: United Nations, 2023d, United Nations, 2023e.

Figure 4 shows the differences in the distribution of the number of people born in particular years. For Ethiopia, the base of the pyramid is the widest and narrows towards the top. This means the largest percentage share of young people. On the other hand, for Japan, the middle part of the pyramid is the widest, which shows a mature society in terms of age.

Comparing these countries, it should be noted that they have relatively similar populations. Japan has a population of 125.7 million, and Ethiopia 120.3 million. The analysis of the percentage share of age groups enables to visualize demographic changes for a developed and developing country. In Japan, the share of the population aged 0-14 was 11.8%, while in Ethiopia it was 40% (The World Bank, 2023h). The opposite phenomenon is visible for the 65+ age group. In Japan, the above group accounted for 29.8% of the population and in Ethiopia 3.1%, while LDC average is 3.6% (The World Bank, 2023h). The above data seem to confirm the thesis about the diversification both in time and space of demographic changes.

4. Implications

The consequences of the ageing process in highly developed societies, coupled with positive birth rates and increased life expectancy, have far-reaching consequences for the world. It seems that demographic changes in the coming decades will determine the direction of changes in the global economy, especially migration. However, this does not mean an improvement in the condition of the economies of the least developed countries.

4.1. Consequences of Demographic Change for LDCs

LDCs account for a significant share of global population growth. For economies described as *struggling with major structural handicaps*, population growth has many negative implications. One of them is the increase in unemployment, the deepening of the so-called 'working poor' phenomenon, difficult access to health care, the worsening problem of illiteracy and the irrational management of resources. By employing the inference method, it can be deduced that the aforementioned factors may exacerbate the issue of extreme poverty prevalent in LDCs and lead to a surge in net migration.

One of the main problems related to the young society is insufficient labour supply. In 2021, the unemployment rate for LDCs was 5.6% of the total workforce (The World Bank, 2023i). In Djibouti, it reached 28% in 2021, in Somalia 19.9%, although there are countries that had a relatively small share of unemployed people such as Cambodia 0.3% and Niger 0.7% (The World Bank, 2023i). When analysing the phenomenon of unemployment, it should be taken into account that the unemployed are registered persons who are actively looking for employment. In addition, employment conditions in LDCs are often described as unstable. Experts also distinguish the problem with the measurement of unemployment and its accurate assessment due to, among others, the seasonality of work in agriculture, lack of job search or part-time work.

Another problem faced by the inhabitants of the poorest countries is the so-called working poor, who despite being employed, work for less than \$1.90 a day. In 2019, more than half of the people in the world employed for the above amount lived in LDCs (ILO, 2022). The consequences of low wages are visible in the level of poverty and insufficient human resources.

One of the main measures that illustrate the economic development of the country is Gross Domestic Product per capita. Using the percentage growth of GDP per capita (annually), negative values are visible in the last two years: in 2020 -1.5%, in 2021 -0.4% (The World Bank, 2023j). One of the variables affecting the change in GDP is population growth. Along with the increase in the number of inhabitants with almost unchanged GDP values, a decrease in the value of the above indicator is visible, reflecting the level of development of the country and its possibilities or limitations in international cooperation. In 2021, the lowest GDP values (as a % change from 2020) were recorded in Afghanistan (-23%) and Myanmar (-18.5%), while Rwanda recorded the largest increase (8.3%) (The World Bank, 2023j). When discussing Afghanistan, it is important to mention the political crisis that began in 2021, resulting in various consequences, such as instability within the country and a decline in public expenditure.

A derivative consequence of countries' population growth is an increase in population density. For the LDCs in 2015-2022, an upward trend in population density can be observed (Table 4). Increasing population density has a number of consequences, one of which is a possible increase in crime. Other implications include biodiversity loss and climate change (European Commission, 2022).

Table 4. Median population density for LDCs in 2015-2022

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Density of population	47	49	50	51	52	53	55	56

Source: (United Nations, 2023c).

Taking into account the positive consequences of the large participation of young people in society, stimulating innovation should be mentioned. Nevertheless, without adequate levels of education and underdeveloped infrastructure, the potential of young people may not be sufficient to drive economic growth. The development of the economy relies on several factors, with financial resources playing a critical role.

4.2. Consequences for Developed Countries

A positive natural increase in the least developed countries directly affects rich countries. It appears that the net migration balance is the best measure of changes in the global economy in terms of population movement. Migrants from the LDCs account for about 17% of the total number of migrants, which shows the importance of the above group for the global economy (IOM UN MIGRATION 2022).

The average net migration value for all LDCs in 2021 was -521,774.0 (The World Bank, 2023k). This means that the number of emigrants was greater than the number of immigrants. Negative values dominated over the years in the above group of countries. In 2021, the lowest net migration values were observed in Afghanistan (-183,672) and Bangladesh (-174,500) and the highest in Nepal (296,541) (The World Bank, 2023l).

The causes of migration can be found in the differences in earnings between countries, armed conflicts or the political situation (IOM, 2011). For highly developed countries, the influx of immigrants from the least developed countries brings both opportunities and threats. Positive consequences include restructuring the working age population in ageing countries and filling the gap in selected occupations, e.g. in Germany in the construction services (Kacperska et al., 2019).

However, the problem of cultural distance is also pointed out, which makes it impossible to fully reconcile the influx of people from other cultures with the local population. The concept of cultural distance is understood as "different patterns of behavior, systems of values and symbolic systems that determine the way of perceiving and evaluating the external world and shaping the behavior of representatives of different cultures" (Hryniewicz, 2011). The clash of different cultures can lead to both legal and social problems; an example of a manifestation of multiculturalism resulting from the influx of immigrants are the created city districts inhabited by individual nations. The so-called 'poverty neighborhoods' are common, resulting from the concentration of immigrants in one neighbourhood. According to Hryniewicz, this could lead to a "potential rebellion" (2011, p. 12)

One notable challenge that arises when immigrants settle in developed countries is the presence of negative attitudes among the local population, often accompanied by fears and difficulties in adapting to new conditions. Despite openness to multiculturalism, a significant influx of immigrants can lead to conflicts in the host country. One of the reasons may be not taking up paid work or a different worldview.

5. Conclusions

The growing global population, particularly in least developed countries, has a significant impact on the future of the global economy. Migration from economically challenged countries, with limited human resources and high poverty rates, can induce demographic changes in highly developed countries. Concurrently, the positive population growth in LDCs presents strain on their underdeveloped infrastructure, and consequently this leads to a worsening of poverty-related issues and relatively lower life expectancies compared to developed countries. Despite an increase in the median life expectancy, it still diverges from the average observed in developed nations. Countries with fertility rates exceeding 6 face evident challenges related to poverty, education, and healthcare.

Demographic change stands as a crucial megatrend significantly influencing the state of the world at present. One can risk the statement that countries where the natural increase is high and the level of GDP per capita is among the lowest in the world, will struggle with problems characteristic of developing economies. Solutions can be found in increasing the availability of health care and education, as well as in the development of infrastructure.

In attempting to answer the first research question (*What are the potential risks associated with a young population in LDCs?*), the following should be indicated:

- 1) increase in unemployment,
- 2) deepening of the so-called 'working poor' phenomena,
- 3) decrease in GDP per capita,
- 4) increase in population density,
- 5) possible increase in insecurity.

When answering the second research question (*How might demographic changes in LDCs influence developed countries?*), it is worth pointing out the relation between the degree of economic development of LDCs and developed countries. With the increasing population in least developed countries, there is a simultaneous rise in migration, leading to an influx of immigrants in various regions, including Western Europe and other countries. The consequences are visible, for example, in Germany. As previously mentioned, the arrival of immigrants from LDCs to developed countries may give rise to social and legal conflicts within the host nations. These conflicts can result in the formation of impoverished neighbourhoods, an increase in crime rates, and instances of violent behavior specifically targeting foreigners. Yet, the positive consequences of the influx of people should also be emphasised, such as filling the professional gap or relieving the burden of the working-age population in the host country. When analysing the consequences of the emigration of citizens of LDCs to developed countries, it should be remembered that the movement of population can have both a negative and a positive impact on the host country. Migrations are a complex phenomenon, and their analysis should be carried out holistically.

When studying demographic changes, it seems impossible to capture all the elements of the economy that they affect. It is also important to point out the dependence of developed countries on the least developed countries. The increase in the number of migrations, along with the increase in the population, leads to spatial changes, whilst it should be borne in mind that demographic changes are divided into phases. This means that countries which are currently in the second phase, called the demographic explosion, in future will experience a decline in the number of births. This confirms the assumption that demographic changes occur in different places and over time.

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Implikacje zmian demograficznych w krajach najstabilniej rozwiniętych

Streszczenie: Zmiany demograficzne są jedną z determinant kształtujących światową gospodarkę. W związku z rosnącą populacją analiza zmian demograficznych w krajach rozwiniętych oraz rozwijających się wydaje się kluczowa. Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja zachodzących zmian w strukturze demograficznej krajów najstabilniej rozwiniętych, w tym podjęcie próby oceny wpływu zaobserwowanych tendencji na gospodarkę światową. W opracowaniu scharakteryzowano wybrane tendencje demograficzne w krajach najstabilniej rozwiniętych, w tym: dodatni przyrost naturalny, wzrost oczekiwanej średniej długości życia, wzrost udziału osób w wieku 0-14 lat. Wskazano również możliwe konsekwencje wzrostu ludności w krajach LDC dla ich gospodarek oraz gospodarek krajów rozwiniętych. Na podstawie analizy literatury oraz danych ilościowych stwierdzono możliwy wzrost migracji netto z krajów LDC oraz możliwość wystąpienia problemów kulturowych w krajach przyjmujących. Metody badawcze zastosowane w artykule to analiza literatury oraz metoda wnioskowania.

Słowa kluczowe: kraje najstabilniej rozwinięte, demografia, populacja.
