

THE EFFECTS OF A VERY YOUNG AGE STRUCTURE ON HAITI

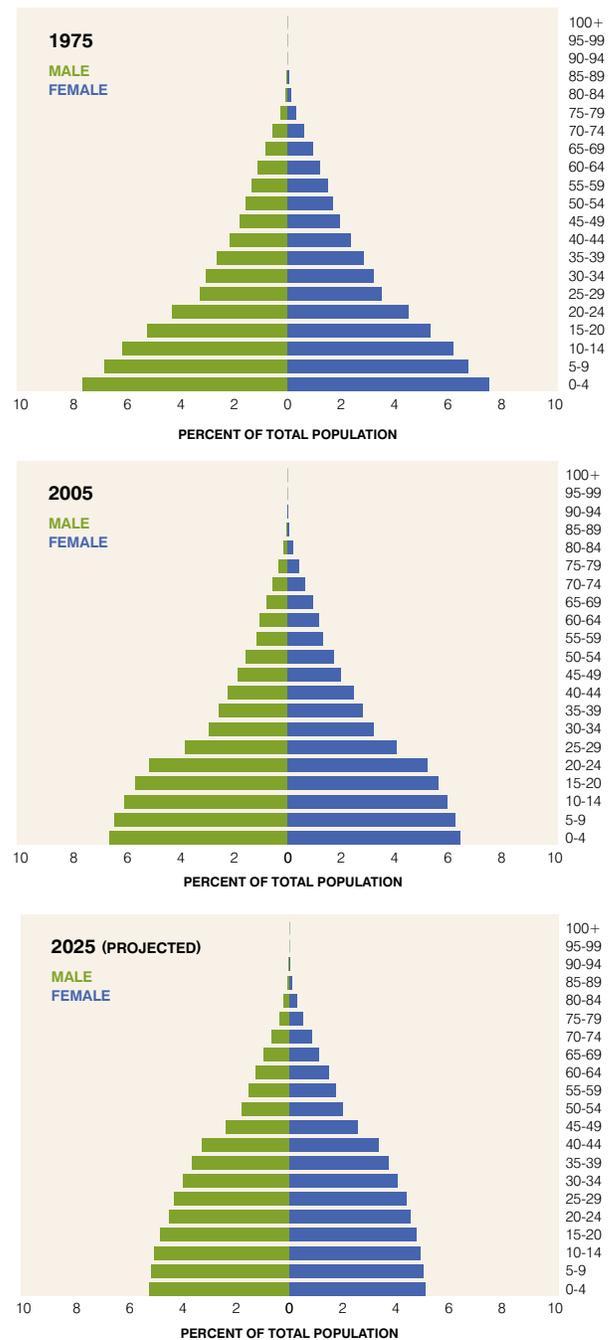
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The devastating earthquake that struck Haiti in early January 2010 adds to the string of misfortunes in a country used to fighting adversity. Political instability and repeated natural disasters have compounded a failure to invest in its human resources and its environment and have prevented the country from achieving a sustainable development path. Haiti's demographic profile, most notably its very young age structure, affects all aspects of reconstruction efforts, from economic opportunities to security issues, political stability, gender equality and climate change adaptation.

Haiti has experienced rapid population growth for several decades. Today, there are 339 inhabitants per square kilometer, and the United Nations medium fertility scenario forecasts further growth of nearly fifty percent by 2040. Neighboring countries such as Jamaica and the Dominican Republic have experienced continuously decreasing fertility rates from the 1970s to the 1990s. In contrast, Haiti's fertility rate increased in the 1980s before falling in the 1990s where it remains at around four children per woman. Haiti's fertility rate is at a level higher than its neighbors, which keeps the country on track to maintain a very young age structure into the future. An important influence on the high fertility rate is the high level of unmet need for family planning: In Haiti, 38 percent of women wish to prevent or delay their next birth but are not using a contraceptive method.

Haiti has the youngest age structure in the Caribbean; almost 70 percent of Haiti's people are under age 30. While young people represent an important asset for any country, they need opportunities in order to prosper. Haiti's demographic reality has and will have a profound impact on development in the country. Population Action International's report *The Shape of Things to Come* 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

FIGURE 1. HAITI'S AGE STRUCTURES



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. While the relationship between age structure and instability is not one of simple cause and effect, demographics do play an important role in mitigating or exacerbating a country's prospects for development.

Haiti's very young age structure is deeply tied to the country's economic recovery and security. Like many countries with large youth cohorts, Haiti has experienced an intense process of urbanization in which the population of the capital, Port-au-Prince, more than doubled between 1982 and 1997. The urban population is predicted to exceed the rural population by 2015. High unemployment rates for urban youth ages 15 to 30 in the city are likely related to the rise of violent street gangs in the slums of Port-au-Prince. As a large wave of young people enter the labor market in the coming years, jobs are crucial to absorb the demographic boom.

Youth could be one of the country's main economic assets. Figure 1 shows that while the proportion of young people ages 15 to 29 in Haiti is increasing, the relative size of the youngest cohorts, ages 0 to 14, has decreased. As a result, the overall proportion of the population under the age of 30 remains the same. This combination of youthful population and lower dependency ratios (the proportion of the population younger than age 15 and older than age 65 compared to the working-age population) is a demographic window of opportunity for economic growth. If, as part of reconstruction and ongoing development, Haiti puts sound policies in place, this limited window of opportunity can boost economic growth, a benefit referred to as the "demographic dividend."

Haiti's gender dynamics are related to the country's high fertility levels, as women often feel compelled to have a child to ensure economic support from their current partner. Any policy strategy aiming at a more sustainable age structure needs to empower both women and men by reducing the gender gap in education, ensuring legal rights for women, increasing the chances for women to get employment in the formal economy and expanding innovative programs that promote responsible fatherhood.

Rapid population growth has also resulted in unsustainable environmental pressure on limited arable land. Today, because of declining agricultural productivity, the country only produces 47 percent of the food it needs. The use of firewood as its primary energy source compounded by demographic factors has exacerbated deforestation and soil erosion. On top of naturally broad temperature variations, Haiti has witnessed longer droughts, shorter but more intense rainy seasons and more frequent tropical storms in recent years. The interplay between human and environmental factors has significantly increased the country's vulnerability to climate change.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve short-term recovery strategies and long-term development goals, Population Action International recommends that the U.S. government, working in coordination with the Haitian 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 Support programs that respond to the needs of a large number of youth and focus on education, vocational training and jobs.**
- 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