

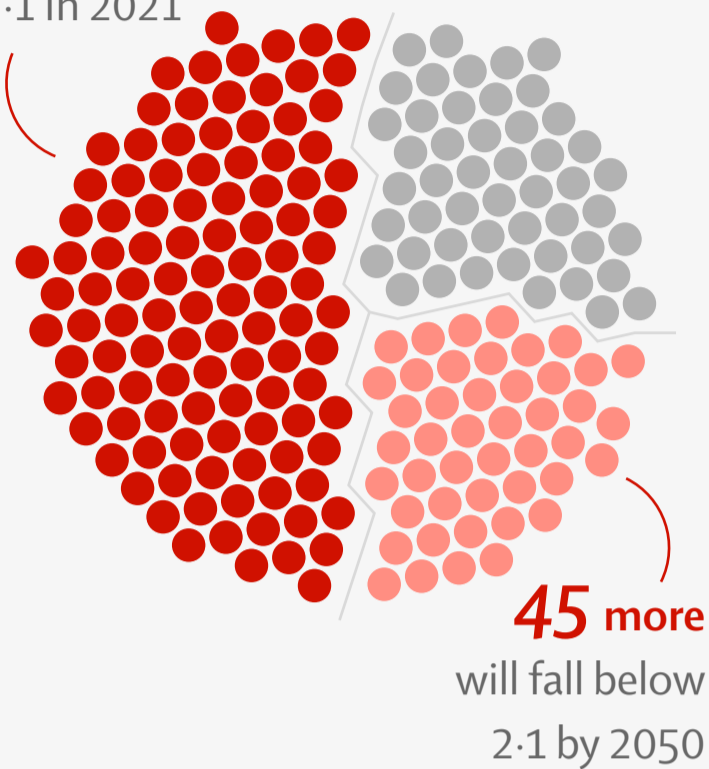
The divergent trajectories of global fertility: causes and concerns

Since 1950, the world has experienced an incredible fertility transition, leading to the majority of countries now having total fertility rates (TFRs) below the replacement level of 2.1 children per person who could give birth.

The majority of countries and territories already have a TFR below the replacement level of 2.1. Even more are expected to fall below that level in the coming decades.

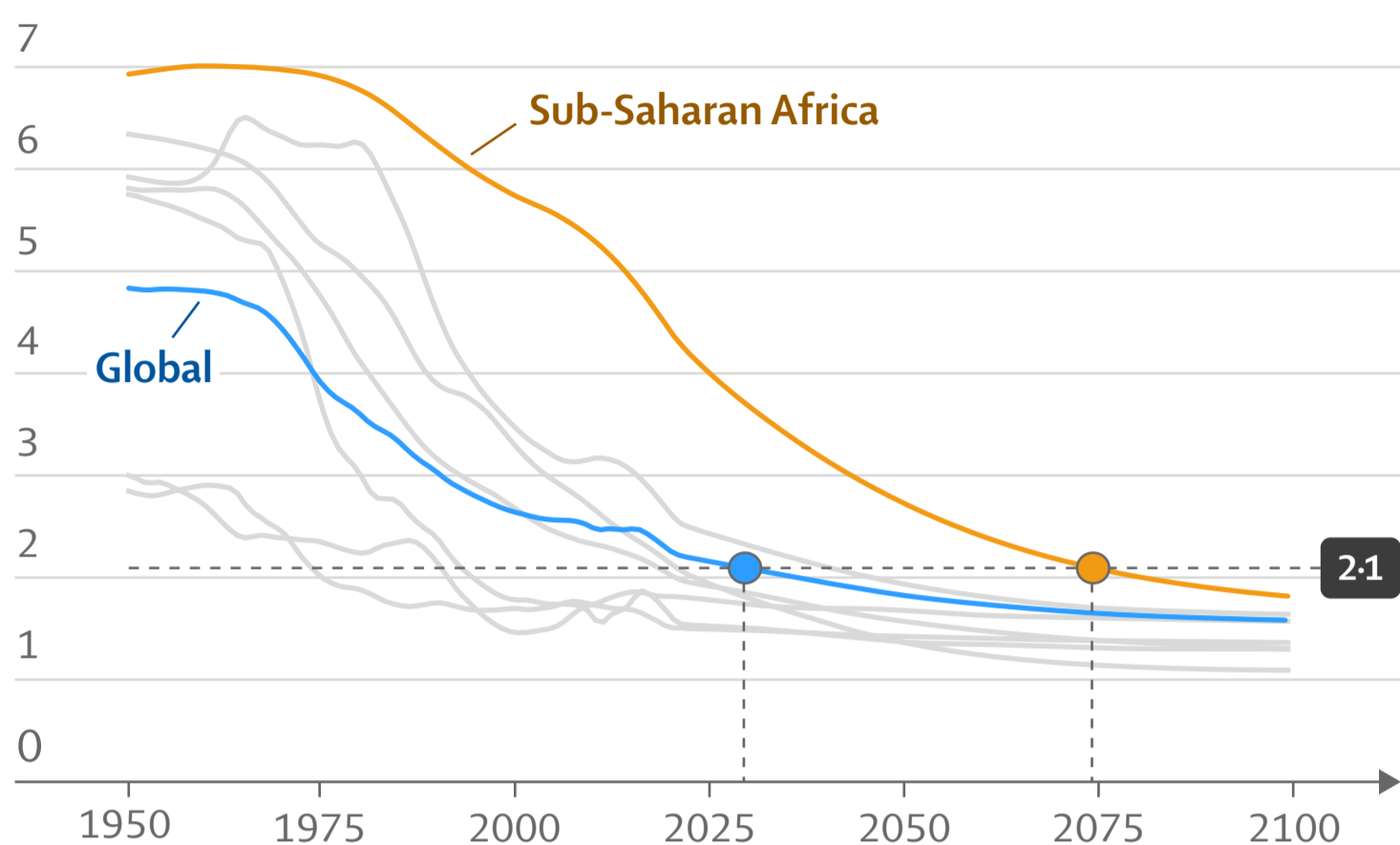
Of 204 countries and territories ...

110 had a TFR below 2.1 in 2021



In contrast, fertility rates in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), especially in western SSA, are not expected to fall below replacement level until much later than most of the world, meaning the SSA population is expected to continue to grow, potentially until the end of the century.

Total fertility rate by region, children per person who could give birth



The contrast between sustained low fertility in the rest of the world and above-replacement fertility across many countries in SSA will cause a substantial demographic imbalance, creating challenges on both ends of the spectrum.

In SSA, rising births will lead to increased numbers of people experiencing:

- ! Severe climate stress
- ! Political instability
- ! Child mortality
- ! Resource insecurity
- ! Poverty



Meanwhile, sustained low fertility across the rest of the world will pose:

- ! Potential labour shortages
- ! Economic challenges associated with supporting larger older populations
- ! Challenges to health care and social security programmes
- ! Potential opportunities for less environmental strain



As national governments confront these challenges, some ways they can adapt include:



Encouraging migration and harnessing the opportunities offered by migration



Implementing policies that support those who wish to have children, so they are better able to pay and care for those children



Exploring how workforce innovations and advancements in artificial intelligence and robotics might lessen the effects of low fertility

Some countries may resist these and other adaptive strategies and explore regressive tactics to increase birth rates, such as:



Pressuring women to stay at home and have more children



Restricting women's reproductive rights



These tactics have many negative consequences

The global community must be vigilant about these setbacks and advocate wherever necessary to respond to declining birth rates and population through other strategies.

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GBD 2021 Collaborators. Findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021. Lancet 2024; published May 18.