

## ABSTRACT

The essay discusses the phenomenon termed 'demographic tsunami' and its possible repercussions in the global socioeconomic and political arena in the near future. It talks about the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and the challenges that meeting them faces, in light of this continuous worldwide demographic imbalance. It identifies three key divides which further complicate the problem: the generational divide, the gender divide and the economic divide. It posits that in order to address this pressing concern, it is necessary to bridge these gaps.

The author offers a series of propositions from the perspective of international law and best practices in governance and the development sector which are geared towards youth empowerment, structural reforms in education and sustainable, circular labor migration and reintegration. It also emphasizes the empowerment of women and the positive role of ICTs in assisting inclusive global development.

The author also discusses the issue of refugees, which comprise 65 million of the total 244 million international migrants as of Q4 2015. He forwards that instead of viewing them as state burdens, they should be considered as additional factors to boost diversity, productivity and economic gains.

In conclusion, the essay advances that instead of designating the phenomenon as a 'demographic tsunami', it should be considered instead as 'demographic propulsion,' signifying a collective, global drive to move forward for inclusive, sustainable development.

## A tsunami is never a good thing.

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A word of Japanese origin, it refers to a series of waves caused by underwater activity in the Earth's crust, often as portent of danger and damage to civilian populations. In the same vein, naming the unequal rise in population of the youth worldwide vis-à-vis the ageing global workforce as a "demographic tsunami" implies the presence of a catastrophe waiting to happen.

One of the earliest use of the term 'demographic tsunami' in academic circles is Kathy Matsui's 1997 report. It referred to a primarily socioeconomic matter: the question of pensions in an ageing Japanese society. Today, two decades after, the term describes a phenomenon which encompasses not only concerns related to the socioeconomic sphere on a national level, but also has politicolegal, cultural and even ecological implications on a global scale, due to the world's rapidly changing demography.

The basis for this concern is factual and undeniable. This imbalance in the population can indeed cause situations of generational conflict, due to the wide gap between generations in the community and the industry.

On the personal level, generational conflicts can happen in interactions and transactions in the social, organizational and professional setting. This includes matters related to communication and information sharing, schedules and even work ethics.

Magnifying this conflict on a macrosocial scale, we can see that it is not only a matter of work-related issues; rather, problems stem from a difference in generational culture, misunderstanding and competing interests. Indeed, the rise of populist leaders like Donald Trump and political moves for ultraconservative nationalistic actions like Brexit have been attributed to political support from the older generation. Their younger peers voted significantly different, spurred on by differing beliefs, principles and values.

Issues regarding social security systems also arise. Certain countries like Australia report an increase in the number of retirees together with a increase in the number of years they will get to receive pension funds; this can result to a financial crisis should there be scarcity of funds to support the retirement system. The majority of the voting populace, depending on the values of their generation, will get to directly influence policy action on this and other similar matters.

Demographies can indeed affect and even change national sentiment, administrative actions and general state policies. This considerable political influence is further skewed when there is an imbalance in the population, which can lead to disenfranchisement of certain age groups.

At this day and age, this concern is going global, seeing that there are a number of factors contributing to this worldwide imbalance.

A considerable number of countries, most of them developed, have low fertility rates. Examples of these are Singapore, Japan and Germany. In contrast, developing countries tend to have higher fertility rates, including Niger and Burundi from Africa and Timor-Leste in Asia.

Another factor affecting the change in global demographics is the ageing population. Certain countries like Japan, Italy and Germany have high percentages of citizens aged 65 and above. In fact, a good number of the countries in the list of the highest elderly population in the world belong to developed European countries.

**This global trend in changing demographics shows the unequal distribution of wealth and population.**

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An ageing workforce and a country's economic status has implications not only at its macro and micro economic spheres at the national level; taken together, these factors influence international politics, global governance and even the world ecology.

How so?

High fertility rates in developing nations, with some of them involved in conflict and turmoil, result to these governments unable to properly feed, educate and employ their citizens. In the long run, because of their growing population, citizens from these developing countries will make up the bulk of the global workforce. However, they remain incompletely educated and poorly skilled.

The high population growth in developing countries is also a self-perpetuating problem of economics. In other words, it is a gift that keeps on giving. Difficulties in resource allocation, distribution and utilization for basic

goods and services (like nutrition and reproductive health education) tend to result in even higher population growth. A sociopolitical monster, it feeds on the ignorance of populace, which in turn hinders progress and results in stagnation.

Even in developing countries which show promise of aggressive economic growth, the high fertility rate of the poor results to the fact that overall socioeconomic development remains non-inclusive, as in the case of the Philippines.

This situation can translate to crises of considerable proportions.

**As the projected global population growth is concentrated in fragile states, it poses enormous uncertainties on global economic growth and political stability.**

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In 2015, the United Nations adopted a universal call to action in the form of Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). This set of global goals is an interrelated series of concepts including sustained economic growth, inclusive, sustainable industrialization, and effective accountable institutions.

Foremost among these is Goal 1: The Eradication of Poverty. Other related goals include zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, and climate action.

However, because of the predicted demographic tsunami, there are grave concerns that meeting these SDGs is nothing but a far-away dream. The divide is too high: the economic gap between the rich and the poor, both at the level of the state and the individual, grows at a steady rate, and this is further compounded by the generational divide.

## “Is there still hope for this world?”

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**I daresay, the answer is a resounding yes.**

For this, we have to look at how we can harness the demographic tsunami and the increasing population of the younger generation. After all, the role of the youth in poverty alleviation and inclusive development is unquestionable. Indeed, they play an increasingly central role in global governance and economics.

In 2010, 1.82 billion people are estimated to be between the ages of 10 and 24. By 2015, this has grown to 1.80 billion. By 2018, the youth sector is estimated to be the largest spending power the world over. By 2020, they comprise half the global workforce. This is no mean feat, considering that there are more people alive now than at every other point in the history of humanity.

From these facts, it is undeniable that the youth of today are the world's leaders of tomorrow, and are thus key in achieving the UN SDGs by 2030.

Therefore, to answer the question of what the UN can do to prevent this feared demographic tsunami, it is important to start planning now and harness what is potentially the greatest human force the world has ever seen.

## OF WATER WALLS AND WAVE BARRIERS

To mitigate the damage of tsunamis, there are certain proposed means and structures which can lessen the destructive effects of meters-high walls of water running at hundreds of kilometres per hour.

In the same way, this demographic tsunami can be mitigated and its harmful effects reigned in, provided that proper planning be made and strategies effectively implemented.

*"At this point, before we continue, allow me to mention the vantage point from whence I draw my perspective.*

*"I am a youth leader, academic and advocate active in the ASEAN Community. As a researcher-lecturer, I focus on international law and policy economics, with a strong emphasis on upholding international human rights laws. As a proactive member of the development sector, my focus is on innovative practices in engaging the global youth sector.*

*"Know then that my recommendations come from a marriage of the principles of international law, human rights, and youth empowerment, principles which I am intimately familiar with."*

There are two complementary methods by which the UN can address this impending situation. The first pertains to sustained, systematic and inclusive youth empowerment, and the second refers to sustainable, beneficial intercountry migration.

Youth empowerment is first on the list.

As the fastest growing demographic sector of the global society, it is imperative that the youth be given proper education, training and employment in order to maximize their potential.

However, data shows that the bulk of the population in the world's 48 least developed countries are the youth sector. This is problematic because these countries cannot afford to give them the opportunities to thrive, thereby wasting their immense potential to transform the future.

This is where the United Nations and other international organizations *must* come in. As entities with the resources, capacity and access to the global youth, it is a moral duty for them to do so, not to mention good investment in terms of economic growth and political stability.

This is because despite humanitarian aid primarily having the concerns of the citizens of the recipient state at its

core, at the time, it also delivers benefits to the citizens of the donor states and the global community.

Medical teams going to far-flung places to contain diseases and help their ravaged victims prevent epidemics from further spreading. Through assistance in the provision of basic necessities and services, citizens of the recipient state can have more opportunities for democratic empowerment and self-sufficiency. Assisting in upholding regional security also allows more international mobility and further strengthens market trading, translating to economic boost for all parties concerned.

Knowing this, individual countries like the United States and regional entities like the European Union are actively involved in providing foreign aid. Working with multinational corporations can also assist in providing skilled training, internships and apprenticeships, thereby mitigating unemployment, particularly for young people coming from impoverished nations.

## Indeed, it is clear that it is in the best interest of everyone in the international community to help the global youth.

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Multinational finance institutions like the World Bank Group and the Asian Development have already geared towards this direction, sponsoring global conferences devoted to the cause, like the WBG Youth Summit, or creating youth-led, youth-dedicated initiatives, like ADB's Youth for Asia.

However, for true and lasting empowerment, there is a need to veer away from simple delegate programmes and individual scholarships. While granting funding and other opportunities for young people who display merit are important and commendable, this strategy is quite limited in scope. Even with the application of youth leadership initiatives and training-of-trainors, capacity-building focused on individuals can only go a certain way.

The reality is that despite the undeniably good intentions of awarded youth leaders to effect change in their respective communities, the lack of resources and institutional support to accomplish youth-based projects and programs hinders many from effectively creating a mark in society. Much like ripples in a calm lake, the rush they create only reaches a certain extent before it is slowly rendered still by the more pervasive status quo.

What is needed to create waves is that the collective rock the lake instead, all together.

More than small-scale, small-impact youth empowerment projects, *structural changes* are needed to be made in education governance and administration. The United Nations should incentivize programmes and agreements between countries and regional organizations in support of lasting reform for quality education, under SDG 4.

An example of this is the Checkmyschool initiative, a citizen-led, youth-centric project where volunteers

actively monitor and rate the services of government schools. In partnership with various stakeholders and using both online and offline means of communication, it connects parents, teachers, school administrators and government ministries of education in order for everyone to work together to solve concerns in the school district, striving for better educational services for children. Piloted in the Philippines, this initiative has now spread to other countries like Indonesia, Cambodia and Mongolia.

Similar practices of constructive engagement and citizen monitoring can lead to social accountability, as applied to the public education sector. Other aspects to help this particular segment can include support for much-needed executive and legislative reforms in education, particularly in developing countries.

The effects of the demographic tsunami can further be averted by targeting subgroups even within the youth sector. I refer to the empowerment of young women.

The gender divide is a much-needed area of focus when it comes to meeting the SDGs. At present, women comprise approximately 40% of the global workforce and an expanding number of more than 50% of the world's university attendees. The possibilities for opening opportunities to them are endless.

A 2011 World Bank study shows that empowering women financially directly benefits the family, children in particular, because the budget is prioritized towards nutrition and education. A 2012 Intel study revealed that doubling the population of women empowered with access to mobile phones has an estimated increase of up to US\$18 billion in the gross domestic product (GDP) of developing countries given a 3-year time span. Indeed, more women with voices tend to influence and equalize policy decisions, and make institutions more representative of their citizenry.

The effect of empowering women, members of the youth in particular, translates not only to sustained, high-

impact economic growth, but also assists in maintaining political stability in regions where it is needed the most.

One of the means by which the generation and gender divide can be forded is through the use of information & communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs have been characterized as a “great equalizer” for global inclusive development. While there remain issues of connectivity due to poor infrastructures, the fact remains that gadgets enjoy an ever-growing market reach, due to ease in transactions and transport delivery.

The youth of today are considered the most tech-savvy of all generations, particularly when it comes to social media and mobile technology. With social media community membership as a fact of life, and mobile technology set to increase at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 40% by 2020, ICT tools are truly important means required to reach out to the global youth: to train and educate, and to economically empower.

This is why UN investments in bridging divides should always keep in mind the possibility of an ICT component in *every* project as an innovative adaptation to the demographic challenge that the world faces today.

**THE SECOND PRONG** of the potential solution to this global dilemma, however, remains not only in the form of UN-funded projects, programmes and national reforms; it lies in the heart of international law and intercountry relations.

As earlier stated, there is an imbalance in economic power and population when graphed demographically: it is often least developed countries which have high numbers of the young generation oft lacking in education, skills and training; in contrast, many developed nations with a rapidly-ageing workforce.

The clear solution then is to promote population migration shifts: encourage people to move! To allow

skilled workers to migrate to countries where the workforce is ageing would be the easy solution.

## However, it is one of the greatest truths in life that easy solutions are often hard to come by.

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Indeed, there are a number of challenges with this proposition.

The first one is the characteristic of the young workers themselves. Many of them lack the required skills to gain employment in other countries where they may be needed. It is thus imperative for labor-sending states to focus on their education and training, two key aspects for their citizens to enable them to compete in the global marketplace. This particular challenge is directly answerable by the propositions expounded as regards

youth empowerment: by improving the education sector through systematic reforms under SDG 4.

The second challenge involves acceptance of the migrant workers in the receiving state. Discrimination often abound in these situations, whereby immigrants are given second-class treatment, not only by communities but also by the receiving government. A solution to this particular problem is for the UN to encourage states to sign, ratify and comply with key international treaties protecting the rights of migrant workers and their families.

It is interesting to note that the “International Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Worker and Members of their Families”, opened for signature on 18 December 1990, only has 38 signatories and 50 parties, most of whom are labor-exporting states. Key labor-receiving, developed countries like the United States, Australia and the Middle East have not ratified it. The earlier Migrant Workers’ Supplementary Provision 1975

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(C143) have similarly not yet been signed nor ratified by a majority of the latter countries, with rare exceptions like Italy.

Compliance with international law, emphasizing human rights and standards of labor, is very important in preventing acts of abuse and discrimination against migrant workers. But how can this be enforced if the labor-receiving countries themselves do not recognize these treaties?

This is the second proposition: incentivize all states to sign the CMW, its Supplementary Provisions, and related ILO conventions. Doing so will assist in integrating these migrating populations more smoothly into their new communities, and result in positive, productive relations among all. This not only helps scale the imbalance caused by the demographic tsunami, it also directly meets SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.

**IT IS A BASIC RULE** in physics that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The same is true when it comes to international socioeconomic matters.

Given that intercountry migration process can be made smoother, easier and more efficient, the third challenge lies in its result: the phenomenon called *brain drain*. Brain drain happens when the migration of skilled labor results in the dearth of a competent labor force in the labor-sending country. It is also known as “human capital flight.” The problem lies when skilled labor, once having escaped its country of origin for better opportunities abroad, refuses to go back. This often results to the labor-sending state would lacking human resources in order to develop its own potential more fully. This is also why labor-sending countries can be quite vocal that they do not want to recognize labor export as a sustained economic strategy, instead viewing it as a stopgap measure.

The concept of brain drain is seen clearly in 2014, when the Philippine government, one of the world's top labor-exporting countries, advertised that it needed to hire more than a hundred foreign skilled workers in various industries because its own skilled labourers have either migrated or are not qualified for the vacant positions.

This problem is something which should be gravely considered. While the educated youth may be viewed as a potent labor force and can be motivated to augment the lowering population, ageing workforce and social security systems of highly developed countries, this consideration must be balanced with the fact that their home countries need them, too.

Return migration helps both the labor-receiving state and the labor-sending state. During the actual period of service, it provides the needed workforce as well as the funds needed to support the domestic social security systems of the states of destination. At the same time, remittances boost the economy of the labor-exporting

states. After service, return migration and reintegration provides the opportunity to inject much-needed practical and technical skills to the education of the new batch of young workers from their home country, further empowering them as the new global workforce. In addition, their extensive experience abroad can help them introduce reforms and craft policies in both industry and governance to improve the administration systems of the labor-exporting state.

In line with this, the UN can look at possibilities of promoting return service. A 2009 report on circular migration has noted that efforts have been made to this avail. Certain labor-exporting countries have established mechanisms enabling migration, return and reintegration; a number of host countries also provide financial and institutional support for migrants' voluntary returns. However, these projects have limited effects on development after return migration.

The UN can provide further support for countries in honing their respective policies on return service and reintegration. It could collaborate with both labor-sending and labor-receiving states in order to find a balance of interests, keeping in mind the rights of the migrant workers and their families, economic returns and labor investments.

**AN INTERESTING TOPIC** when it comes to addressing the demographic tsunami is the issue regarding refugees. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates a total number of 65.3 million refugees in the world as of Q4 2015. This forms only a small fraction of the total number of international migrants worldwide, at a total of 244 million, but it remains a recurring and highly-important issue.

The United Nations' initiative to promote and support national policies which seek to eradicate discrimination against refugees and assist them in integration should be

continued. Similar to the proposition on assistance in migration, these refugees should be afforded the opportunities denied to them in their home countries. An excellent example is Mexico and its pro-refugee legislation.

A step towards this goal involves changing the view that refugees are simply burdens to the host state; rather, they should be considered as an additional labor force needing only supplementary education and training, when applicable. They say two heads are better than one; this is moreso when diversity is celebrated.

At the same time, the UN Security Council should take more proactive measures to temper national and international conflicts. This can be in the form of sending peace forces, providing sanctions against governments supporting the conflict, or prosecuting under international criminal law. Doing so will help move towards encouraging refugees to go back to their home countries and help in their rebuilding.

## Conclusion: From Tsunami to Propulsion

A tsunami is never a good thing. While it is unarguably a majestic display of nature's wonderful, powerful forces, it is often synonymous with massive death and destruction.

The human spirit, however, is equally indomitable and ingenious. Engineers are now devising means by which to conquer the power of tsunamis, not only to prevent harm to human life and property, but also in order to generate energy. It is a testament to the principle that how we best plan, prepare and address a calamity foresees how we can prevent it from becoming a disaster.

In the same way, this demographic tsunami should not be viewed as a problem absent concrete solutions. Instead, we should reframe our way of thinking and consider this phenomenon as a challenge instead. In line with this, we can alternatively call it our "demographic propulsion".

Propulsion is a much more positive term, and symbolizes a solution instead of a problem.

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It refers to fuel, a drive, the ability to push forward.

Tsunamis are generated by the movement of faults, whether due to earthquake or volcanic activity. In the case of our demographic tsunami, damage is caused by divides: the generational divide, the gender divide, and the economic divide.

In order to transform the momentum of our tsunami into actual propulsion, we need to address these divides individually: first, by strengthening structural reforms in public education across governments, especially those in developing countries; and second, by upholding human rights-based policies in international migration, whether

these migrations be under international refugee law or national labor laws.

The UN should promote national policies in helping people move to balance the disproportionate demographics. This includes capacitating the youth, male and female equally, to make them job-ready in the global marketplace; encouraging governments to comply with international labor standards, and; incentivizing return service to their home countries.

The unique situation of refugees should similarly be viewed not as a problem, but rather as an opportunity for diversity, integration and economic growth.

**The tsunami is fast approaching, and we should be gearing up to mitigate its impending damages.**

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It's a high-stakes game relying on cooperation and collaboration, where either everyone pitches in to win, or no one does so. Is the world ready for this challenge?

**Only we as a global collective can answer this.** ■

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