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Q7

## What is the concept of a 'demographic winter'? Is the world moving towards such a situation? Elaborate.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS I · 10 marks · World's Physical Geography

Salient features of world's physical geography.

### Core demand of the question

- Explain the concept of a demographic winter
- Elaborate whether the world is moving towards such a situation

### Revision summary

Demographic winter means long below-replacement fertility, ageing, and a shrinking worker-to-retiree balance.

Replacement fertility is about 2.1 in low-mortality societies.

Japan, South Korea and much of Europe already fit this description.

World fertility has fallen and the planet is ageing, but Africa still drives global population growth.

India's fertility is near replacement, with sharp differences among States.

The world is diverging. It is not entering one single winter.

### Introduction

**Demographic winter** is a popular phrase, not a UN category. It names a society whose **fertility stays below replacement**, whose **age pyramid inverts**, and whose **workforce shrinks** relative to the old. The phrase points to fewer births, more deaths among the aged, and a politics of pensions and care. The world as a whole is **ageing**, but it is not yet one frozen planet. **Africa and parts of West Asia** still have young, growing populations.

### Body

#### The concept

Replacement **total fertility** is about **2.1** children per woman in low-mortality societies. Below that for decades, each generation is smaller. **Median age** rises. The share of people above 65 grows. The **potential support ratio of workers to retirees falls**. **The idea also implies social effects: fewer siblings, delayed marriage, empty schools, immigration as a labour fix, and anxiety about decline**. **East Asia and much of Europe are the textbook cases: Japan, South Korea, Italy, Spain, Germany**. Some governments pay baby bonuses. None has found a simple switch.

The concept is **regional**. A country can have below-replacement fertility and still grow for a time because of **population momentum** and immigration.

- **Below-replacement fertility:** This is the engine of the idea.

- **Ageing and shrinkage:** First the pyramid greys. Then absolute numbers may fall.
- **Political economy:** Pensions, health, and who does care work become the central state problem.

### Is the world moving there?

**Globally**, fertility has fallen sharply from the mid-twentieth century. UN population projections show a world that **grows more slowly** and **ages**, with a peak later this century in many central scenarios. That is a move **toward** winter in the average. It is not an arrival. **Sub-Saharan Africa** still has high fertility and will supply much of future world population growth. **South Asia** is mixed. India's fertility has fallen to around **replacement** in recent National Family Health Survey rounds, with large State variation. **Latin America and East Asia** are already in or near winter. The world is therefore **diverging**. There is a grey North and East Asia, a still-young Africa, and a middle belt.

Migration can postpone winter in receiving countries. It does not raise the world's birth rate. Climate, housing costs, women's education and the **unfinished gender contract** of care are the real drivers of low fertility. There is not a single cultural death.

- **Yes, in structure:** Global ageing and sub-replacement fertility appear in a rising share of countries.
- **No, as a uniform fate:** Africa's youth and momentum keep world population from a sudden freeze.
- **India's place:** India has a closing window of dividend. It is not yet a Japanese-style winter. Some States already look East Asian.

Demographic winter is a fair warning for rich low-fertility societies. It is a bad map if it erases the **child-rich** parts of the world that still need schools more than geriatric wards.

### Flow diagram

Fertility below 2.1 -> Ageing pyramid  
Ageing pyramid -> Workforce and care stress  
Europe East Asia -> Workforce and care stress  
Africa high fertility -> not winter Young growing populations  
India near replacement -> Dividend window closing

### Conclusion

Demographic winter means durable below-replacement fertility and a greying, shrinking labour force. Much of Europe and East Asia already live there. The world is moving toward older age structures, yet growth continues where fertility remains high. Policy has to plan both for pensions in the grey belt and for education in the young belt.

### Facts & figures

#### Replacement TFR

About 2.1 children per woman is the conventional replacement level where mortality is low.

**NFHS-5 fertility**

India's National Family Health Survey-5 reported a total fertility rate of 2.0, around replacement, with large State gaps.

**UN ageing trend**

United Nations World Population Prospects show falling global fertility and a rising share of older persons, with later peak population in central scenarios.

**East Asian ultra-low fertility**

Several East Asian societies have recorded fertility far below replacement for years, the sharpest 'winter' cases.

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