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The demographic maltese situation

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The total population of Malta as of the 26th November 2005 stood at 404,039 persons. This figure includes both the Maltese and foreign residents. Since the first census of 1842, the population has increased three-and-a-half fold, from 114,499 in 1842 to the present count. While the population increased by over 60 per cent between the first Census and the turn of the 20th century, the population has more than doubled between the beginning of the 20th century and the turn of the 21st, i.e. between 1901 and 2005. In the last Census the population grew by 6.9 per cent when compared to the previous Census that was taken in 1995, thus indicating a slowdown in population growth. In fact, in the period between 1985 and 1995, the population had grown by 9.5 per cent. The period between the 1995 Census and the 16th Census held in 2005 saw a marked decline in the average annual growth, the population increasing by an average of 0.7 per cent per year between the two Census years.

Over a period of around 160 years, between 1842 and 2005, the population growth rate has varied. This is attributed mainly to a decline in the birth rate, resulting in an ageing population. Approaching the year 2020, trends indicate that there will be a further slowdown in the rate of growth and population would probably reach 426 000 inhabitants. This demographic slowdown will not halt the annual average population growth for the period 1990-2020. The current population projections for 2050 picture the 0-14 year-olds representing 12.3 per cent of the total population. Another 27.0 per cent is accounted for by the 65+ year-old groups. This predicted distribution is quite different from the one in 2005. As an example, the estimated percentage number of persons aged 65 years and over for this year stood at 13.3 per cent, which is much lower than that for 2050. This behavior is clearly a result of the current ageing trends in the Maltese population. Population change is the net result of two demographic aspects: the difference between births and deaths and the migration balance. Migration, in bound and out bound, may become a major issue in the near future that could affect population growth in either way.

The number of newborns to Maltese parents is also on the decline. The crude birth rate for 2004, which is the number of live births to Maltese parents per 1,000 mid-year population, stood at 9.46. This decrease in the births lowered the total fertility rate to 1.37 from 1.48, which was recorded during 2003. The fertility index has experienced a gradual drop since 1990. This trend is expected to change during the period 2010-2020 with a modest increase.

The Maltese the population is primarily urban and this tendency is confirmed over time (88% of the inhabitants were in towns in 1990, 92% are currently and nearly 94% will be in 2020). In this context, the share of the rural population is marginal, since the Rural community today number less than one in ten inhabitants. This statistic indicates a sever depopulation of the Maltese rural areas, which will lose nearly 44% of its population between 1990 and 2020. This statistic may give the wrong picture since most to the farmers live in towns and not on the farm.

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The ageing of the Maltese population is an evident phenomenon. When data of the last two censuses are compared, a definite shift in the age composition of the population is observed. The indications are of an ageing population, mainly due to a lower fertility rate and an improvement in longevity. The 65+ age group now represents 13.7 per cent of the population, up from 11.4 per cent in 1995. On the other hand, in November 2005, persons under 25 years of age made up 31.5 per cent of residents, compared to 36.6 per cent in 1995. The average age was approximately 33 years in 1990 and should reach 42 years in 2020, against 38 years currently. This trend has been observed since the 1967 Census and is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. If 31% of the inhabitants had less than 20 years in 1990, they are not any more that 25% and will be only 20% in 2020. Result, in fact the intermediate age brackets (40 to 59 years) currently are most representative of the Maltese population. In the horizon of 2020, 40% of the Maltese population will be older than 50 years.

Demographic balance according to sex reveals that women remain slightly more numerous than men. On 27 November 2005, the population consisted of 200,715 male residents, or 49.7 per cent, and 203,324 female residents, or 50.3 per cent. The gap between males and females in the population has narrowed. Hence, the number of females for every thousand males has gone down to 1,013 in 2005, from 1,088 in 1957 and 1,024 in 1995. Similarly, women live on average four years more than the men, in a country where the life expectancy has increased steadily between 1990 and 2020, from 76,3 to 80,4 years. Lastly, it is worth to note the decreasing trend in infant mortality rate, from 9,2% in 1990 it is estimated to reach 5,9 % by 2020.

The dependency ratio (the sum of persons aged less than 15 years plus persons aged 65 years and over, as a percentage of the working-age population between 15 and 64 years) stood at 44.5 per cent in November 2005, compared to 50.4 per cent in the 1995 Census and a projected average of 55.1 per cent across the world. This decrease is explained by a marked decline in the proportion of persons aged less than 15 years as a percentage of the working-age population. In fact, in 2005 persons in this age bracket made up 24.7 per cent of the population, compared to 33.2 per cent in 1995. A declining fertility rate is expected to lead to further reduction of the dependency ratio in the coming years.

Old-age-dependency ratio Compared to the EU, Malta has a significantly lower old-age-dependency ratio, measured as the proportion of persons aged 65 years or over divided by the working-age population. In fact, locally this ratio stands at 19.8 per cent compared to 24.9 per cent across the EU. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that, in the 1995 Census, the old-age-dependency ratio stood at 17.2 per cent. Thus, it is has increased significantly within a span of ten years.

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Compared to the EU, Malta's population is still relatively 'young'. The proportion of the population under 25 years of age is 31.5 per cent, compared to 29.1 per cent across the EU. However, 20.3 per cent of the Maltese population is aged between 50 and 64 years, this being significantly higher than the EU average of 17.9 per cent. Hence, within the next ten years or so, most of the persons within this age cohort will be over 65 years. Assuming that current socio-demographic trends continue in the future, the main characteristics being a declining fertility rate and a low immigration intake of younger persons, a steady increase in the old-age-dependency ratio is expected in the coming years.

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