

PL 2

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND HEALTH SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

| BACKGROUND

Global demographic transitions—including aging populations and declining fertility rates, youth bulges, and complex migration patterns—pose significant challenges to health systems worldwide[1],2. These will result in structural changes with around 55 per cent of the world’s population living in towns and cities, projected to be 70 per cent by 2050[2]. However, changing demographics will impact health systems if we do not prepare; for example, countries with the most increase in non-communicable diseases, are least prepared to address in terms of their health systems[3]. Investing in health systems will be critical to tackle these challenges[4]. Key issues on demographic transitions relate to changing disease burden, healthcare infrastructure and access, aging population and long-term care, workforce and economic impact, maternal and child health, health policy and financing and technological advancements. In addition, there is a need to think of a life course approach to health and well-being and how health systems can be designed for this purpose[5]. Overall, there is therefore a need for a holistic approach to adapt health systems to respond to the shifts in demographics.

[1] PMAC 2026 overarching concept note: 1. PMAC2026 Concept Note as of 24 Jan (1).pdf

[2] Shifting Demographics | United Nations

[3] The Changing Demographics of Global Health

[4] Global health 2035: a world converging within a generation - The Lancet

[5] The life-course approach: from theory to practice: case stories from two small countries in Europe

| OBJECTIVES

The objective of this plenary is to highlight the imperative for inclusive and sustainable health systems that are resilient to shifting demographics, recognising the need for multi-sectoral, life-course approaches in the context of current global developments, to improve population health and well-being.



Speaker

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Dr. Ailan Li is the WHO Representative to Thailand, taking up office in September 2025.

Prior to her current position, Dr. Li served as Assistant Director-General for Universal Health Coverage and Healthier Populations at WHO Headquarters from 2023, where she led global initiatives addressing the environmental, social, and economic determinants of health—such as climate change, tobacco control, chemical safety, road safety, food systems and nutrition, physical activity, air pollution, and radiation—within a comprehensive One Health framework.

Previously, she was the WHO Representative to Cambodia (2019–2023) and Regional Emergency Director for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme in the Western Pacific, also serving as Director of the Division of Health Security and Emergencies in the region.

Before joining WHO, Dr. Li was an Associate Professor at the School of Public Health, Peking University. Her public health career spans preventive medicine, disease prevention and control, health policy, health systems, social science, and food safety.

Dr. Li holds a medical degree from Beijing Medical University, China, and a Master's degree in Health Social Science from Mahidol University, Thailand.