

## Africa's Population in the 21st Century

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One of the world's great structural changes of the coming decades will be the huge increase of the population of Africa. Today, more than 1.2 billion people live in Africa, whereas about 1 billion live in the Americas and three-quarters of a billion in Europe. However, the populations of those two regions have stopped growing and Asia is about to follow. Shrinking is already ongoing in Japan and other countries will no longer grow with China being the most striking one.

Africa's population, by contrast, will double to 2 billion by 2050. By 2100, its population could easily have doubled again, according to the [United Nations](#). If that is right, at the end of this century at least 4 billion of the world's 11 billion people will be African, against just 1.2 billion today.

This precipitous rise owes to the fact that infant and child mortality has dropped dramatically, and life expectancy, though still relatively low, has improved. On average fertility rates remain high at about five children per woman. Until Africa's fertility rate falls sharply, its population will increase exponentially. This growth will be fueled by the young age structure of the African population (the phenomenon known as the population momentum). Africa's population will also remain very young with a median age of just 20 years, as compared with 43 in Europe. By 2035, more than half of all new jobseekers will be African. One does not have to be Thomas Malthus to take an alarming view on these projections.

Africa is also a net importer of food with food security being increasingly challenging. In [Tanzania](#), where the population has more than quintupled from 10 million at independence in 1964 to an estimated 55 million today, 70 per cent of farmers use nothing more sophisticated than a hoe, and Tanzania's population could double again by 2035. Fortunately, it is fertile and about twice the size of California. Even so, it will have to double food production just to stand still. Disputes over land and water are intensifying because of the competing demands of peasants and commercial farmers vs. those of development.

Tanzania is comparatively better placed than many of the 48 African sovereign states. Take drought-stricken Niger: Several million of the 17 million inhabitants have only precarious access to food. Women in Niger have, on average, 7.6 babies. The population is expected to triple to 55 million by 2050. By 2100, Niger could be one of the 10 most populous countries on earth. Four of the others are likely to be Nigeria, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Tanzania.

Urbanisation is another hot spot. In the next 35 years, Africa's urban population will rise from 470 million to 1.3 billion, according to the [Mo Ibrahim Foundation](#). In 1960, there were only three African cities with more than 1 million people. Today, there are 56 and by 2030 there will be nearly 100.

However, the biggest problem can be summed up in one word: jobs. Unlike in growing and prospering Asia only a few countries, among them Ethiopia, have anything like a coherent industrial policy.

Africa's future will be played out at the level of states and cities. It requires, at a minimum, bringing fertility rates down so that dependency ratios fall. But it will require much more to capture a demographic dividend leading to growth and prosperity like in many Asian countries: an agricultural revolution, planned cities, education for men and women, tens of millions of formal and taxable jobs, investment in infrastructure, trustworthy governance and institutions and more.

Get it right and Africa could yet be an engine for the world. Get it wrong, and mass migration, terrorism, and conflict beckon. It is in the interest not just of Africans, but of the whole world, that Africa grasps the nettle.

There is no doubt: „*The future of the African continent starts with managing fertility!*“

## About the WDA Forum

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Population trends as well as ageing and generational issues are among the key challenges of the 21st century but also a source of unique opportunities. With a vision of maintaining and enhancing welfare and prosperity in the future, the WDA Forum aims to address and research these demographic issues and their impact on the social, economic and political environment in the international context. To this end, it has defined five areas of action: work life, retirement plans, financial markets, health and competitiveness. As a think tank, the WDA Forum works closely with the Institute of Insurance Economics at the University of St.Gallen as well as other educational and research institutions including the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston, Stanford University in California and Fudan University in Shanghai. The WDA Forum was established in 2002 and is based in St.Gallen.

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