

Failure to address Africa's rising population is not an option

COMMENT

John May & Hans Groth

Africa will dominate global population growth in the 21st century. Almost 1bn people, or 13 per cent of the world's population, live in sub-Saharan Africa today. That number will more than double by 2050 and 4bn people (or 36 per cent of the world's population) could live in the region by 2100, according to a projection last month by the UN Population Division.

The main reason for the rapid growth is a sharp decline in infant and child mortality, with no associated reduction in birth rates. Today, sub-Saharan women have five children on average, compared with 6.7 in 1970.

Growing populations in the sub-Saharan region will influence societies, economic outcomes and geopolitics. In addition, the expected effects on food and water security (exacerbated by climate change) will be unprecedented.

These trends will impact not only the region but the rest of the world. Europe appears to be particularly vulnerable as immigration from sub-Saharan Africa is likely to intensify in coming decades.

The good news is that African demographics appear to be commanding more international attention. The G20-Africa Partnership Conference, held in Berlin in June, focused specifically on Africa's population boom. The G20 Summit in Hamburg this weekend will also address Africa's population size and highlight the need for better employment opportunities.

Sub-Saharan Africa is at a crossroads regarding the potential to capture a

demographic dividend – an economic surplus triggered by the decline in birth rates, a decrease in the number of young dependants and an increase in the proportion of working-age adults. But the pressing policy question is whether the region can replicate the conditions that enabled several east Asian countries to prosper from their own demographic dividends from the early 1960s to the 1990s.

For this to happen, public policies will need to manage a rapid and significant decline in fertility. To trigger such a sharp fall, countries must achieve a contraceptive revolution, in which more than 75 per cent of couples are using modern contraceptive methods. The current rate in sub-Saharan Africa is only 26 per cent.

The mere supply of family planning services will not be enough, however. Much more work is needed to promote the idea that smaller families are beneficial.

There will be no African demographic dividend without job creation

Policymakers and their development partners need to understand the implications of demographic dynamics and the crucial role of fertility reduction. Too many African policymakers, scholars, opinion leaders and business planners still believe that education and economic growth alone will trigger a fertility decline. As a result, African leaders remain diffident about intervening proactively in the debate.

In addition, Africa needs continued investment and improvement in its healthcare systems. The hoped for fertility decline will depend on further

improvements to women's rights, such as combating child marriage.

Making sure that women are able to access contraceptives is a priority. This month, the second London Family Planning Summit will rekindle international efforts to increase access to modern family planning for African women and girls.

Last but not least, Africans urgently need jobs. There will be no demographic dividend without job creation. According to the International Monetary Fund, between 18m and 20m new jobs – roughly equal to the population of Mali or Niger – will be needed annually over the next 25 years on the continent. If these trends are extrapolated until 2050, the new jobs required would be almost equivalent to the entire European population. The prerequisites to meet this huge challenge are education and better healthcare, followed by investment based on stable economic and political conditions.

The task ahead is formidable, not only for sub-Saharan Africa but also for the rest of the world. Failure is not an option: a bad outcome would harm both the region and the world. Failing to capture its demographic dividend would lead to millions of sub-Saharan Africans living in poverty and in slums. It would result in a restless young population and provoke social disruption and human suffering that could spill over well beyond the continent.

*John May is visiting scholar at the Population Reference Bureau, Washington DC.
Hans Groth is chairman of the board at the World Demographic & Ageing Forum, St Gallen. They recently published the book 'Africa's Population: In Search of a Demographic Dividend' (Springer, 2017)*