

Africa's Population: Failure Is Not an Option

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We are used to social media exploding and controversy over statements made by President Donald Trump. But over the past month, a shockwave of anger and charges of European arrogance and racism have been levelled at France's new, charming, and youthful President. What triggered the social media storm that spread around the world was President Macron's answer to a question put by a reporter from the Cote d'Ivoire at the recent G20 summit press conference. Asked why there was still no Marshall Plan for Africa, President Macron pointed, among other things, to the high birth rate of African women, which he said was one of a number of reasons for slowing down the continent's economic development.

However, watching the press conference on YouTube reveals that President Macron was making a valid point, one that is at the heart of a complex issue. He referred to the differences between rebuilding stable social and political structures in post-war Europe and the much more complex challenges across the vast African continent. President Macron mentioned, among other things, the need for stable government, fighting corruption, and the potential economic burden of its current population boom. The forecasts of the United Nations are remarkable: by 2050, the African population will double to 2.5 billion people and will almost quadruple by 2100. While this population growth is due thankfully to reduced infant mortality rates, it is set to increase, further owing to unchanged high birth rates of more than five children per woman in sub-Saharan Africa.

A new book "[Africa's Population: In Search of a Demographic Dividend](#)", edited by Hans Groth of the St. Gallen World Demographic and Aging Forum and John F. May of the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, asks how Africa can accelerate its economic growth by benefitting from its changing population structure. When thinking about the migration flows from Africa today, policy makers would be well advised to take on board the fact that the continent is set to dominate global population dynamics in the 21st century.

Such a population boom can have positive consequences: the development of the Asian Tigers between 1960 and 1990 has shown that a growing population brings benefits. But what are the conditions to create a "Democratic Dividend" in Africa, ask the editors? Eighteen million new jobs, estimates the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—a naïve thought if stable political and economic conditions leading to increasing economic investment in Africa are not there. Undoubtedly, investments will be needed in schooling and professional education, healthcare, information centers for family planning, and access to modern forms of birth control. In this regard, Groth and May stress the importance of women's rights in achieving much of this. They caution "failure is not an option" as it would lead to a global humanitarian and political catastrophe with social unrest and increasing migration flows.

The need for leadership focused in unrelenting commitment to family planning, sexual health care, and maternity care has never been greater. Thankfully, many key global health stakeholders such as [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and the [Children's Investment Fund Foundation](#) (CIFF) are leading from the front, promoting measures to boost family planning and empowering teenage girls and boys with the skills, knowledge and tools to control their sexual and reproductive health. UN agencies are also playing a crucial role. Not to mention the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the world leaders, civil society, and the

private sector are committed to achieving by 2030. And last but not least, all of us individually by supporting [SheDecides](#).

There will be further opportunities this year to discuss the impacts of the demographic trends in Africa on geopolitics, business and society at the [International Population Conference](#) in Cape Town, South Africa.

So, while President Macron's statement has led to upset, what it has also hopefully done is draw attention to the need to focus on how all the African countries can equally benefit from this population boom and realize the "Democratic Dividend", similar to the development of the Asian Tigers, making it a "win-win" situation for the Western world. Surely, there needs to be a plan "with" Africa. One where Africa seizes the opportunity its growing young demographics offers by achieving stable economic and political conditions across the continent with the appropriate support from around the world. In this sense, President Macron deserves praise for stirring up the discussion.

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