Case study

The implications of Africa’s youthful population

To many people, the image of Africa is of a place of large families and high fertility, a continent in which societies are under extreme stress and where the young greatly outnumber the old. For example, in southern Somalia some girls marry as early as 14 and have their first baby soon afterwards. As well as bearing and rearing children, their duties include working in the fields, fetching water and sweeping faeces from the straw huts. They have no contraception or schooling. The average African woman born today can expect to have five children, compared with just 1.7 in East Asia. Africa’s population has grown from 110 million in 1850 to a billion today, and should reach almost 2 billion by 2100.

However, another Africa is emerging. Cities are restraining population growth, just as they have in Asia and Latin America. A new African middle class is taking out mortgages and moving into newly built flats – and two children is what they want. Africa has now become the fastest-urbanizing continent as well as the fastest-growing one.

A demographic transition is beginning. Whereas in 1990 the continent’s total fertility rate was over six, by 2030, according to United Nations projections, the total fertility rate in sub-Saharan Africa could fall to three. By 2050 it could be below 2.5. As societies grow richer, and start to move from high fertility to low, the size of their working-age population increases. They have fewer children, the grandparents’ generation has already died off, and so they have disproportionately large numbers of working-age adults. A fast-growing, economically active population provides the initial impetus to industrial production; then a supply of new workers coming from villages can, if handled properly, enable a country to become more productive. China and East Asia are the models. Africa’s people are its biggest asset. However, the period of greatest potential, when the working-age population is disproportionately large, is not open-ended. Societies age, and as they do the number of older dependents grows and the moment passes. Africa has a generation or two to show whether it is able to follow the path blazed by East Asia and reap the benefits of changing population patterns.

Fears for Africa

Africa needs a more scientific, intensive approach to farming, more efficient cities; more female education; honest governments; and better economic policies. There are three main reasons for doubt about its ability to achieve these: food insecurity, disease and political instability.

Food insecurity—Sub-saharan Africa currently produces less food per head than at any time since independence. Farms are getting smaller, and the average smallholding of just over half an acre (0.25 hectares) is too small to feed a family. Africa badly needs a green revolution. Many countries in Asia used large cropping systems and irrigation, which are unsuited to dry Africa. The task of providing for hungry and thirsty people will be complicated by climate change.
Even its best-case scenario (an increase in global temperatures of 1.1–2.9°C by 2100) could be ruinous. Some 75–250 million Africans could go thirsty. That will mean that girls will spend longer walking to fetch water, which could encourage them to drop out of school and bear children earlier. Large parts of Africa may soon be too dry for grazing, leading to conflicts between rival cattle herders or, as in Sudan’s Darfur region, between herders and settled farmers.

These are predictions, not certainties. Tree cover in southern Niger, for example, has increased 10-fold since the devastating droughts of the 1970s. A government decision to let farmers, rather than the state, own the trees, has made them more valuable by allowing locals to capture the benefits of harvesting bark, branches, seeds and fruits, meaning that locals are less likely to cut them down. Trees limit soil erosion; some “fix” the soil with nitrogen. Elsewhere, though, the losses are huge. Forests in Kenya have shrunk by at least 60% since 1990, mainly because more people are cutting down trees for fuel.

**Disease** The second reason for pessimism is that disease puts Africa’s families under great strain. In southern Africa, mainly as a result of HIV/AIDS, more and more families are headed by children. There are now 50 million orphaned or abandoned children in Africa. Malaria and HIV/AIDS account for about a third of the continent’s 10 million deaths each year. In the 10 years to 1995, more than 4 million Africans died of AIDS, most of them aged between 20 and 59. HIV/AIDS is damaging that very section of the population – working-age adults – on which the “demographic dividend” depends. For example, some 20% of households in Burkina Faso have reduced their work or abandoned their farms due to AIDS. In Zimbabwe up to 70% of deaths in children under five years are due to AIDS.

**Political instability** Another reason for pessimism is due to some of Africa’s political violence, corruption and weak or non-existent governing institutions. In some cities the rate of unemployment is 70%. In the worst cases, civil war has meant that the demographic transition begun, but was reversed. The demographic transition begins with a fall in the death rate but in some African countries death rates have risen. Africa’s highest fertility rates are in the refugee and internally displaced camps in Sudan and Somalia, then in those countries recovering from war, then in famine-pocked patches of desert and scrub stretching from Mauritania to Kenya.

**Activity**

1. Compare the population growth rates in Africa and Europe as shown in Figure 1.1.
2. Contrast the population pyramids of Uganda and Italy as shown in Figure 1.2.
3. Explain why Africa has the potential to increase the ratio of its working population compared with the dependent population.
Case study

**Family size and gender ratios**

**Sex ratio**

In many countries there is an unbalanced sex ratio. This is for various reasons such as the social or cultural preference for boys in some places; the impact of migration; differences in life expectancy among men and women.

**Sex ratio in India**

Selective abortion has accelerated in a globalizing India. Wealthier and better-educated Indians still want sons: a survey revealed that female foeticide was highest among women with a university degree. The urban middle classes can afford the ultrasound tests to determine the sex of the foetus. Between 2003 and 2005 just 880 girls were born for every 1,000 boys. Tamil Nadu has the highest number of girls per 1,000 boys at around 950, whereas Punjab has the least, about 800.

The shortage of women has had negative social effects: unmarried young men have turned to crime, and violence against women has increased. Some men in the rich northern state of Haryana have taken to buying brides from other parts of India. Some of these wives become slaves and their children are shunned.

**Changes in family size**

Average family size in the UK has changed considerably since the 19th century.

In China, average family size has fallen rapidly as the country has modernized. In 1950 the average family size was 5.3, and this fell to 3.96 in 1990, 3.10 in 2010 and 3.02 in 2015.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870s</td>
<td>Between 5 and 6 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>2 children</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Post World War II baby boom</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>Gradual decline in fertility</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>1.6–1.8 children</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>2.1 – Slight increase due to grandchildren of post-World War II baby boom</td>
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**Figure 1**: Average household size, mid-1980s and mid-2000s

Source: https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/47701118.pdf