



Development pathways for the DRC to 2050

Demographics

Kouassi Yeboua

Last updated 15 May 2023

Demographics

The characteristics of a country's population can shape its long-term social, economic, and political foundations; thus, understanding a nation's demographic profile indicates its development prospects.

The population of the DR Congo is made up of 40 ethnic groups and a wide variety of sub-groups.[1] This diversity is an important factor in political, social and cultural terms and has evolved into an important source of tensions and conflicts in the country. The population is predominantly animist and Christian while French is the official language. The other major recognised and spoken national languages are Kikongo (in the west), Lingala (in Kinshasa and the northwest), Swahili (in the east) and Tshiluba (in the south centre).[2]

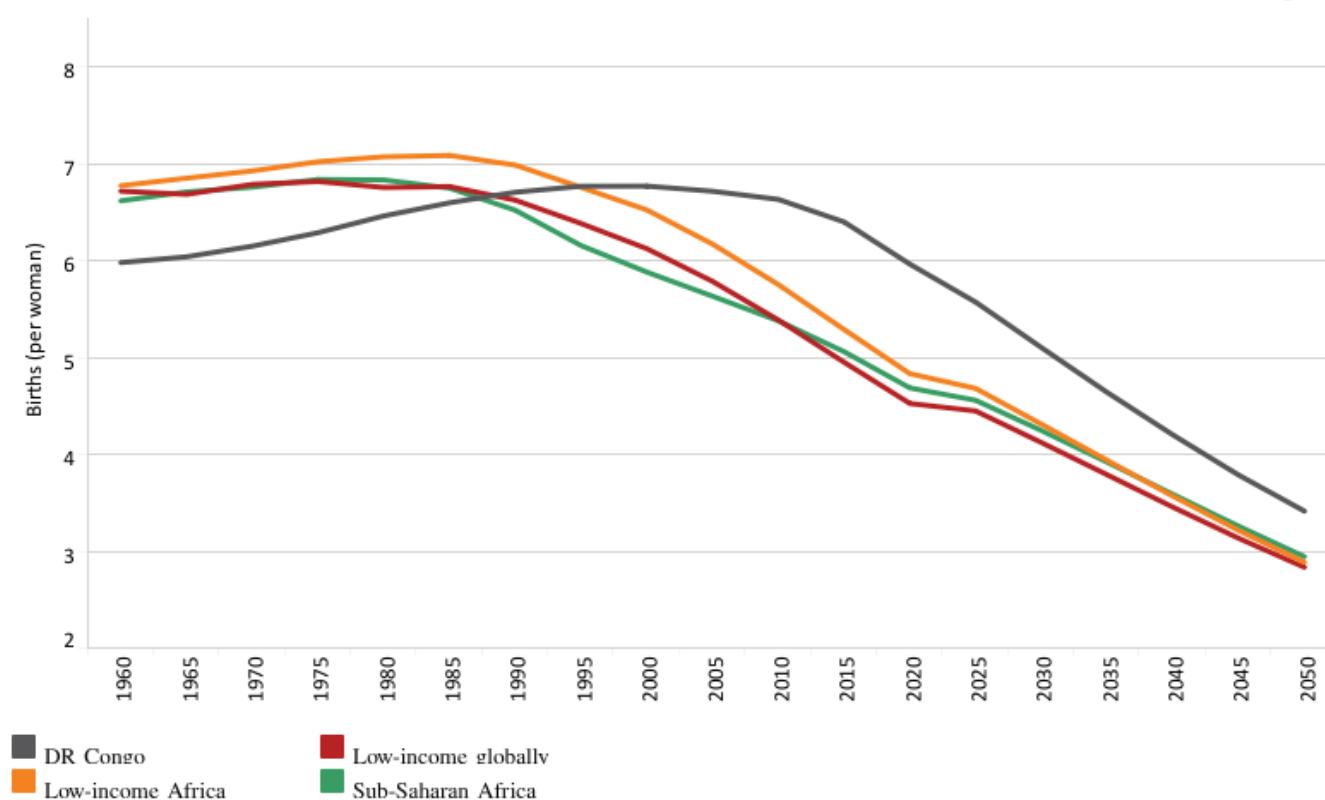
The fertility rate in the DR Congo was 5.9 children per woman in 2019, down from its average level of 6.7 in the 1990s. With one of the highest fertility rates in the world — it is currently ranked third globally after Niger (6.9) and Somalia (6.1) — the DR Congo's population is rapidly growing. The growth rate in 2019 was about 3.2%, making it the fifth highest in terms of population growth in Africa. Its total population was estimated at 89.5 million in 2020, and the country ranks third in Africa after Nigeria and Ethiopia in population size.

The fertility rate is not homogenous across the country. According to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2013/2014, Kinshasa has the lowest fertility rate with 4.2 children per woman. The highest fertility rate is recorded in Kasai Occidental with 8.2 children per woman. The urban areas have a lower fertility rate (5.4) compared to the rural areas (7.3).

The fertility rate also varies according to the level of education and wealth of the mother. The average number of children per woman with at least a secondary education is 2.9, and 7.4 for a woman with no education. The average number of children per woman in the poorest households is 7.6 while it is 4.9 in the wealthiest households. [3] Modern contraception use is about 20% and varies according to the level of education. For instance, it is 19% among women with at least secondary education while it is only 4% among women with no education.[4]

On the Current Path, the total fertility rate in the DR Congo is expected to be 3.4 in 2050. This will be above the averages for sub-Saharan Africa (2.9) and low-income countries globally (2.8) in 2050 (Chart 3). The country will then have the sixth highest fertility rate in the world.

Chart 3: Total fertility rate for DRC and other groups



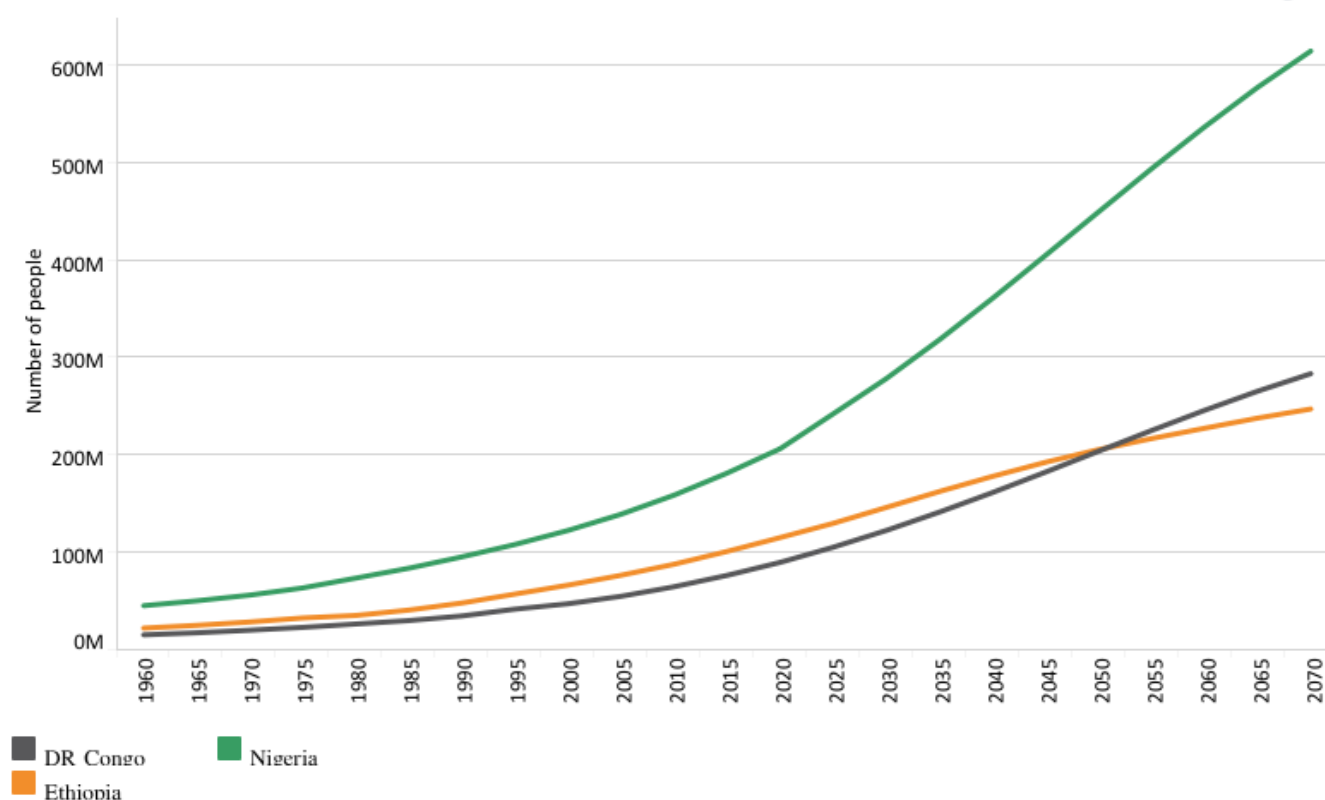
Source: Forecast in IFs version 7.54; historical data from the United Nations Population Division

[View on Tableau Public](#)

Navigation icons: back, forward, search, and share.

On the Current Path, the total population of the DR Congo is estimated to double by 2045 and overtake Ethiopia from 2050 to become the second most populous country in Africa after Nigeria (Chart 4).

Chart 4: Population figures for DRC, Ethiopia and Nigeria



Source: Forecast in IFs version 7.54; historical data from the United Nations Population Division

[View on Tableau Public](#)

Navigation icons: back, forward, search, and share.

The high population growth in the DR Congo goes hand-in-hand with rapid urbanisation. In 2019, 45% of the population was living in urban areas and it is projected to reach 64% in 2050.[5] As a result of this rapid urbanisation, Kinshasa, the capital city with its population estimated at 12 million in 2016 and an annual growth rate of about 5.1%, is projected to be home to 24 million people by 2030. It will become the most populous city in Africa, ahead of Cairo and Lagos.[6]

This is likely to pose huge challenges without proper urban planning and management and if the creation of employment opportunities for urban youth is not achieved. Nearly 75% of the urban population in the DR Congo live in slums. This is 15 percentage points higher than the average for sub-Saharan Africa.[7]

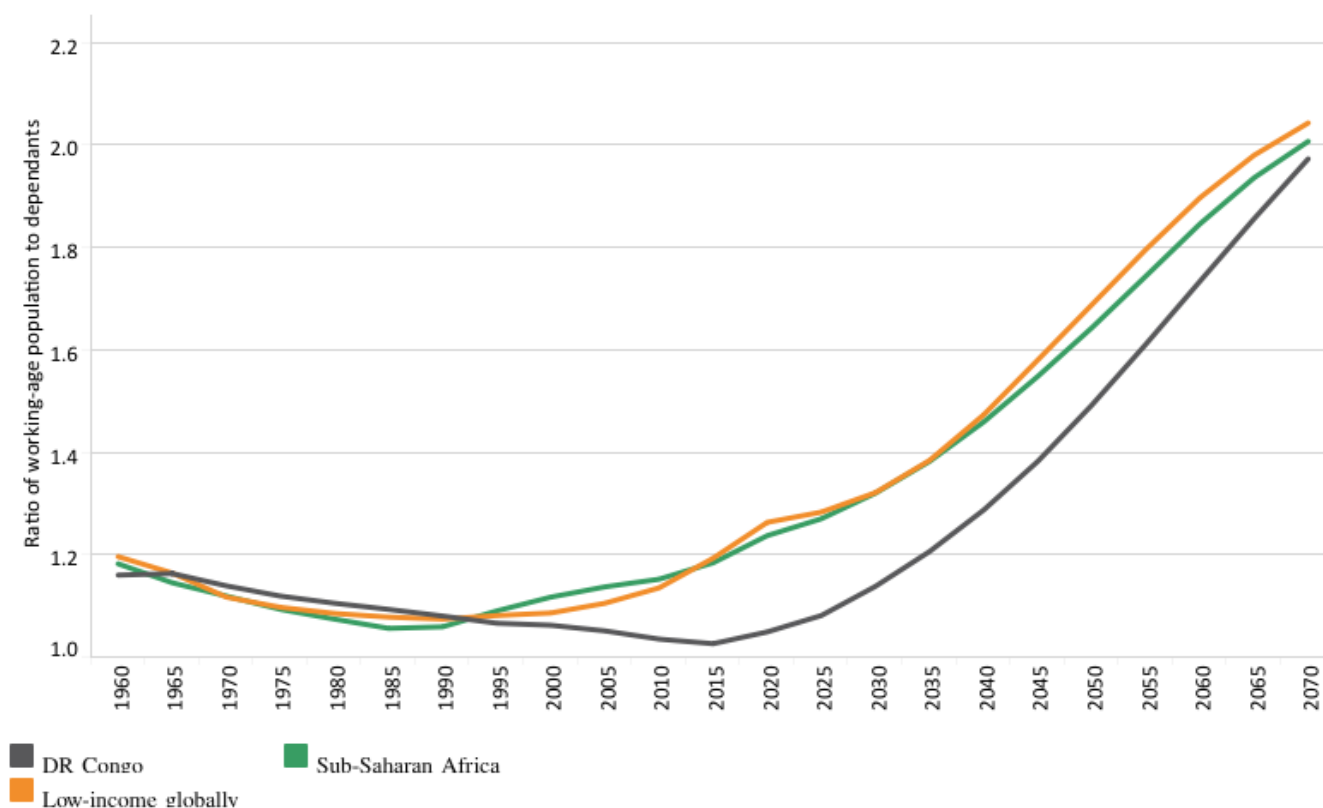
One of the important aspects of a nation's population is the age structure because it can contribute to or delay economic growth and progress in human development. The share of the working-age population (15 to 64 years) is currently 51% of the total population, and it is projected to be 60% in 2050.

About 46% of the country's population is under the age of 15. This means that a large portion of the population is dependent on the small workforce to provide for its needs. The population under 15 years is expected to decline but will still constitute about 36% of the population in 2050. The share of the elderly (65 and above) has been stable over time — it is about 3% — and it is projected to reach 3.6% in 2050.

When the ratio of the working-age population to dependent is 1.7:1 or more, countries often experience more rapid growth provided the growing number of workers can be absorbed by the labour market. This is an easy way in which to measure a country's demographic dividend.

On the Current Path, the ratio of the working-age population to dependents will only be at 1.2:1 in 2030 and 1.5:1 in 2050, below the threshold ratio of 1.7:1 that a country needs to reap the demographic dividend. The DR Congo only gets to this positive ratio at around 2060, implying that it will achieve its demographic dividend almost a decade later than the average for low-income countries globally.

Chart 5: Demographic dividend for DRC and other groups



Source: Forecast in IFs version 7.54; historical data from the United Nations Population Division

[View on Tableau Public](#)

Navigation icons: back, forward, search, and share.

Empirical studies have shown that the demographic dividend contributed significantly to the East Asian countries' economic miracle, however, the demographic change was not something that happened automatically but rather the result of demographic policies. For instance, these countries improved access to contraceptive services and encouraged couples to have fewer children through incentives.[8] Therefore, appropriate policies need to be implemented by DR Congo authorities to stimulate the demographic transition and to reap the demographic dividend.

The DR Congo also has a large youth bulge at 49%. A youth bulge is defined as the percentage of the population between 15 and 29 years old relative to the population aged 15 and above. In addition to the requirement for more spending on education, health services and job creation, large numbers of young adults can positively influence change in a country.

Events such as the Arab Spring and social unrest in Chile and Sudan have shown that large numbers of young adults, particularly males without employment or job prospects, can carry the seeds for socio-political instability but they also have the potential of youth activism leading to positive political changes in a country.

Without the design and implementation of sound demographic policies aimed at bringing down the current high fertility

rate, the rapidly growing population in the DR Congo is a significant obstacle to the country's progress towards economic prosperity and decent human development.

Endnotes

1. The number of ethnic groups varies according to sources. Demographic data in the DRC should be taken with caution. The first and so far only census conducted in the country dates from 1984.
2. DR Congo, [Deuxieme Enquete Demographique et de Santé](#) (EDS-RDC II 2013–2014), Ministère du Plan et Suivi de la Mise en oeuvre de la Révolution de la Modernité, Septembre 2014
3. DR Congo, [Deuxieme Enquete Demographique et de Santé](#) (EDS-RDC II 2013–2014), Ministère du Plan et Suivi de la Mise en oeuvre de la Révolution de la Modernité, Septembre 2014
4. DR Congo, [Deuxieme Enquete Demographique et de Santé](#) (EDS-RDC II 2013–2014), Ministère du Plan et Suivi de la Mise en oeuvre de la Révolution de la Modernité, Septembre 2014
5. United Nations, [World Urbanisation Prospects](#): the 2018 revision, New York: UN, 2019,
6. World Bank, Democratic Republic of Congo Urbanization Review: Productive and Inclusive Cities for an Emerging Congo, Directions in Development: Environment and Sustainable Development, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018.
7. World Bank, Democratic Republic of Congo Urbanization Review: Productive and Inclusive Cities for an Emerging Congo, Directions in Development: Environment and Sustainable Development, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018.
8. A Mason (ed.), [Population Policies and Programs in East Asia](#), Population and Health Series No. 123, Honolulu: East-West Centre, 2001

Donors and sponsors



Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the [Creative Commons BY license](#). You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts [can be embedded](#) in any site.

Cite this research

Kouassi Yeboua (2025) Development pathways for the DRC to 2050. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/special-reports/country/drc/> [Online Resource] Updated 15 May 2023.

About the authors

Dr Kouassi Yeboua previously worked as a Senior Researcher at AFI, where he led significant ISS studies on the long-term development prospects of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Horn of Africa, Nigeria, Malawi, and Mozambique. His research focuses on development economics, macroeconomics, gender, and economic modeling. He holds a PhD in Economics.

About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.