



The Rebirth: Tunisia's potential development pathways to 2040

Population

Jakkie Cilliers and Stellah Kwasi

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Population

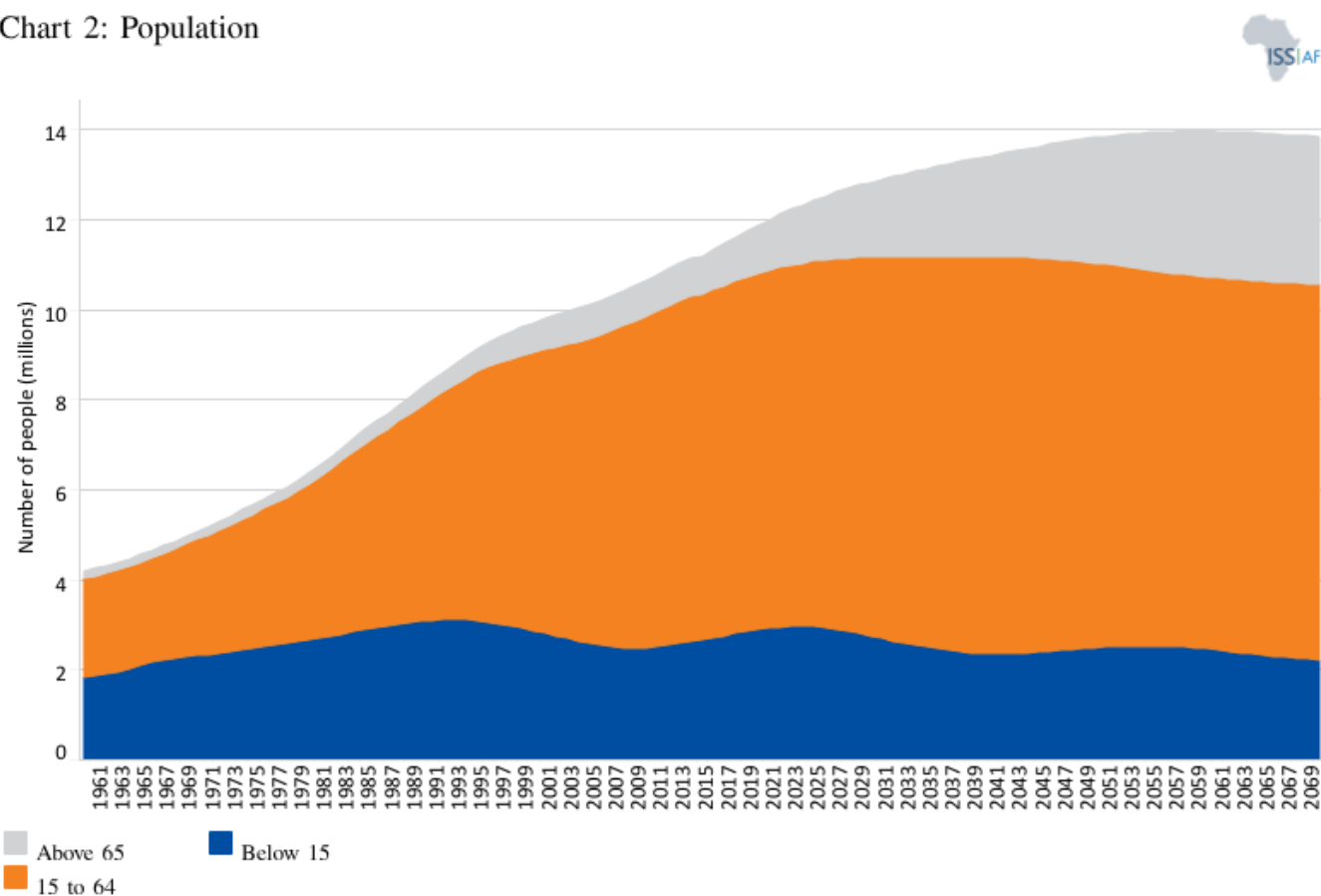
Tunisia's population was estimated at 11.8 million in 2019 and is expected to increase to 13.3 million by 2040. The country's population is largely urban, well educated and significantly older than that of most other countries in the MENA region and even the average for OLMICs, as shown in Chart 2. Generally, this is the result of progressive social reforms, including family planning and the higher legal age of marriage. [1]

The Code of personal status and Tunisia's liberalisation of abortion laws also had a positive impact on the reproductive health of women. [2] The result has contributed to the steady decline in the total fertility rate (TFR), particularly since 1995.

Combined with education and urbanisation, Tunisia's efforts to empower women reduced TFR from about seven children per woman at independence to approximately two children per woman by 2005. Today, TFR in Tunisia is the third lowest in Africa (behind Libya and Mauritius) and is rapidly approaching the demographic profile for UMICs, characterised by low birth and death rates and a higher median age.

In fact, Tunisia's TFR is projected to fall below the replacement level of 2.1 children in the early 2020s, which will cause a decline in the size of the working-age population (15–64 years) while the elderly population (65 years and over) will grow.

Chart 2: Population



Source: IFs version 7.45, historical data from United Nations Population Division

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Also evident from Chart 2 is the rapid increase in the size of Tunisia's working-age population (15–64 years) in the years

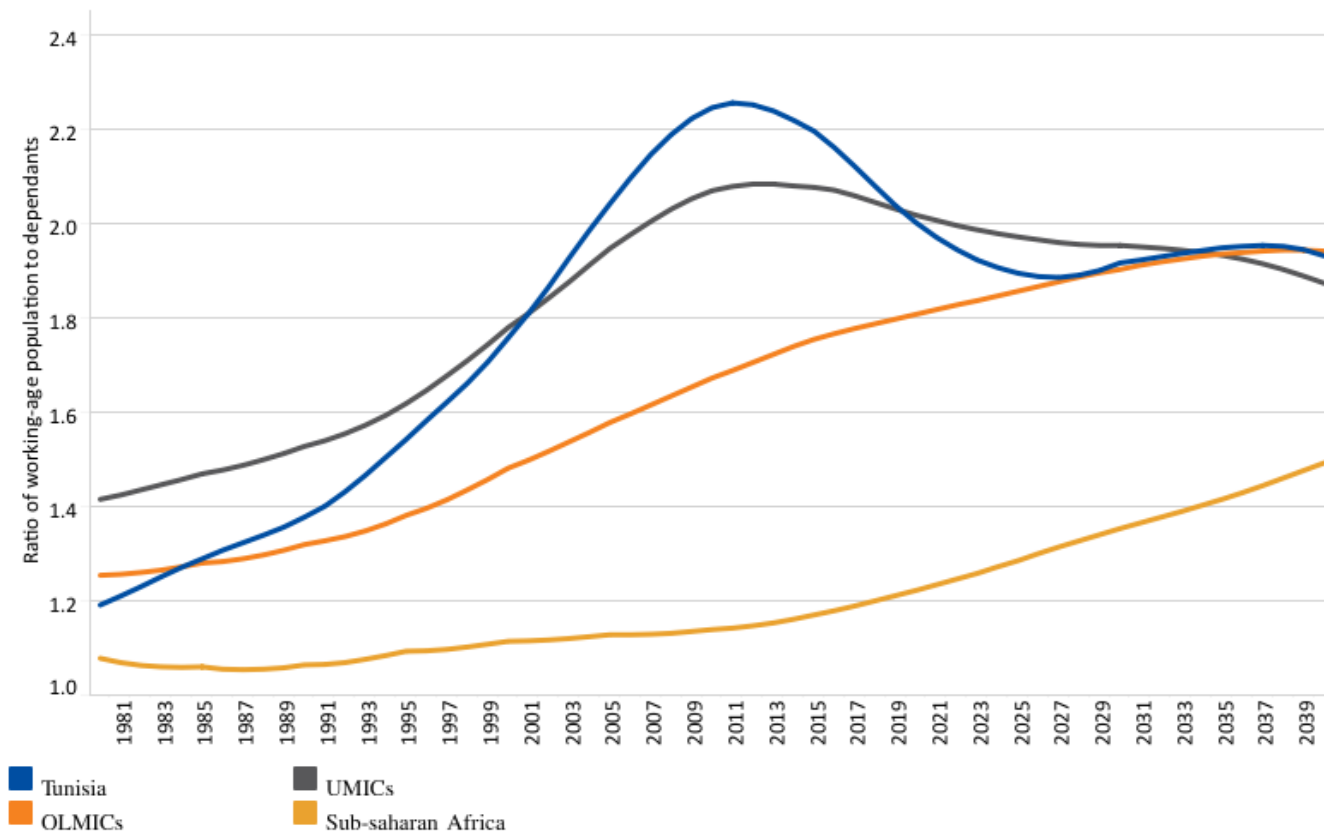
preceding the Freedom and Dignity Revolution. In the absence of jobs and employment opportunities, this rapid growth proved destabilising, particularly since it was accompanied by increased levels of urbanisation and educational attainment.

However, the share of the adult population between 15 and 29 years — known as the ‘youth bulge’ — is now shrinking quite rapidly, which will likely moderate the risk of greater social unrest.

Tunisia reached its peak demographic dividend, or the ratio of working-age people to dependants, in 2011, when it had about 2.3 people of working age for every dependant (Chart 3). This ratio has since declined to the current rate of two people of working age for every dependant and is projected to remain relatively constant to 2040.

This favourable ratio with regard to the contribution that labour makes to economic growth is not, however, translating into income growth, as would be expected.

Chart 3: Demographic dividend, Tunisia and other groups



Source: IFs version 7.45, historical data from United Nations Population Division

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Tunisia is moving rapidly through its demographic transition without having achieved the associated benefits that typically accompany high levels of urbanisation, improved health outcomes and high levels of education. Income and overall economic growth have deteriorated and job opportunities in the formal sector are scarce.

The impediment, it would seem, is the country's opaque economic system, which is dominated by strong vested interests and allows little competition. Despite the impressive human capital outcomes, it has under-delivered in terms of employment and economic inclusion.

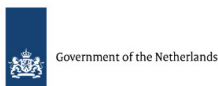
The next decade will continue to offer Tunisia a demographic window to harness the economic potential of its large working-age population before the ratio slowly declines. Thereafter, the country might have to compensate for its smaller ratio of working-age population to dependants through higher savings, investment and technology — none of which has performed particularly well previously.

Tunisia's rapidly ageing population will require greater spending on preventing, diagnosing and treating non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cancer, which are often costlier and require more sophisticated resources than communicable diseases. Managing the non-communicable and communicable disease burden at once is especially difficult and will require increased spending on health.

Endnotes

1. RH Curtiss, Tunisia: 'A country that works' – Tunisia's family planning success underlies its economic progress, [Washington Report on Middle East Affairs](#), November–December 1996
2. I Nazer, The Tunisian experience in legal abortion, *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics*, 17:5, Mar–Apr 1980, 488–92.

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About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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