



Demographics

Potential benefits of reducing fertility rates

Jakkie Cilliers

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Potential benefits of reducing fertility rates

The preceding analysis confirms that lower fertility rates are generally associated with higher income levels, both globally and in Africa.

Generally, a [decline in fertility](#) follows a decline in child mortality with a time lag of several years as parents come to no longer expect to lose as many children as they did previously. The provision of basic infrastructure for water and sanitation and advances in primary healthcare reduce infant mortality and eventually contribute to lower fertility rates.

Historically, the need for many children relates to the expectation that some children could die before adulthood and families' need for labour in economies dominated by employment in the agricultural sector—a characteristic of many poor and developing countries.

The level of female education is perhaps the most important driver in reducing fertility rates since it tends to reduce fertility and allow for an increase in female participation in the [labour force](#). Women who are better educated have more employment opportunities and are likely to want fewer children. Educated parents are also more likely to be better informed about modern contraceptives and the benefits of lower fertility rates regarding educational opportunities. In contrast, fertility rates tend to be higher in regions where women have a lower social status, less authority and fewer opportunities outside the household.

Although the Middle East and North Africa are generally not considered progressive regions concerning gender parity (with the limited exception of Tunisia), girls in these regions were about 5% more likely to be enrolled in primary school in 2015 than girls in sub-Saharan Africa. However, from an economic productivity perspective, the investment in female education in North Africa is largely wasted, with the female share of the total labour force being roughly half that in sub-Saharan Africa (24% versus 43%).

The use of modern contraceptives is a more immediate driver of total fertility rates than education, although poor access to education among women constrains uptake. Research suggests that the average gap between actual and desired fertility could be as high as two children per woman in sub-Saharan Africa,^[1] pointing to a large, pent-up demand for the provision of modern contraceptives. Data from the UN Population Division forecast that in 2018 the unmet demand for modern contraceptives in low-income Africa would have been 28% and 25% in lower middle-income African countries, with large country-to-country variations. In 2017, estimates for the unmet need for [family planning](#) in Africa for women of reproductive age (15–49 years) and who were married or in union ranged from 12% (Zimbabwe) to 41% (DR Congo).

Cultural factors in Africa may promote higher fertility rates, with the dominant preference appearing to favour large families. Although sub-Saharan Africa is currently the poorest performing region when it comes to the uptake of contraception use, things are rapidly changing, with all ten countries that showed the fastest improvement in uptake between 2010 and 2019 being in this region (Malawi, Lesotho, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Uganda, Madagascar and Mozambique). Pessimism about Africa's potential to reduce its fertility rates may thus be misplaced, with seven of the ten biggest decreases in [total fertility rates](#) globally between 2010 and 2019 also seen in sub-Saharan Africa (Uganda, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Kenya, Chad and Somalia).

Endnotes

1. D Canning, R Sangeeta and YS Abdo (eds.), *Africa's demographic transition: Dividend or disaster?*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2015, 19.

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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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