



# Demographics

Conclusion: Working towards Africa's demographic dividend

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## Conclusion: Working towards Africa's demographic dividend

This theme explains how Africa's high fertility rates constrain development. In addition, the acute focus of healthcare systems on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 that is discussed as part of the theme on [Health and WaSH](#) means that fewer resources have been dedicated to family planning, reproductive health services and healthcare for new mothers and infants in Africa than previously. In addition, disruptions to academic programmes and teachers having been affected directly by the disease compromised educational quality, another variable in fertility rates. Government-imposed restrictions on movement as well as the fear of catching the disease have been cited by fertile adults in Africa as reasons for not obtaining contraception during the pandemic. It is then unsurprising, in the wake of these disruptions, that the rate of unwanted teen pregnancies has increased owing to an interruption in family planning services and the typical impact that economic downturns have on fertility.

An increase in incidence of [gender-based violence](#) was also reported during the pandemic, implying that women's social emancipation (the deep driver of fertility rates) may also be [affected](#). The global economic downturn associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine also mean that government revenue, and thus the capacity to implement fertility-reducing programmes, will be stretched for years to come.

The drop-down menu in [Chart 6](#) allows the user to view the impact of the Demographics and Health scenario that reduces the population growth rate compared to the Current Path forecast and increases the ratio of working-age persons to dependants, increasing average incomes.

The rapid increase in the size of the labour force relative to dependants in Japan, China and the Asian Tiger countries was key to their rapid economic growth and development. Several decades later, they all face the opposite problem: a slowdown in growth because a shrinking workforce (as a portion of the total population) has to support a growing elderly population.

Most of Africa still finds itself in the early stages of the demographic transition. The shift from high mortality and fertility rates to lower rates has started, but it is progressing gradually and slower than it historically did in other regions due to low urbanisation and education and poor health. Africa's youthful population and rural composition contrast with a picture of ageing populations in the rest of the world. Africa is actually the only region globally where the size of the working-age population as a proportion of the total population is increasing.

Although Africa's demographic profile has improved since the late 1980s, the ratio of working-age persons to dependants is low. In the Current Path forecast, Africa will enter a potential demographic window of opportunity only the second half of the 21st century. At that point investments in labour saving devices elsewhere in the world will likely rob Africa of the opportunity to benefit from that potential dividend to the same extent as happened in China, the Asian Tigers and India. Elsewhere the focus is on the contributions from capital and technology and Africans will have to work very hard on improving the quality of their abundance of labour if the continent is to reap its window of opportunity.

Africa needs more rapid fertility declines in countries with fast-growing populations, particularly those which have to date had a less-than-average rate of fertility decline. Governments, especially those in low- and lower-middle-income countries, need to make family planning a high priority on their developmental agenda. This applies most pertinently to Niger, Somalia, the DR Congo, Chad, Mali, Angola, Nigeria, Burundi, Burkina Faso, The Gambia and Uganda. In all these countries, the total fertility rate exceeded five children per woman in 2019. In an additional 25 countries, the average fertility rate is between four and five children per woman. Rural fertility rates are significantly higher than those in urban areas and differ according to income, education and economic activity, complicating these dynamics.

Changes in fertility reflect shifts in social and cultural norms that may take time, yet even a slow start to the fertility

transition can rapidly pick up momentum. Political leadership in discussing gender inequality, access to modern contraceptives, child marriage and family size is vital, as are public media campaigns that demonstrate the health and economic benefits of smaller families and later marriage.

There are additional benefits of advancing Africa's demographic dividend, including the prospect of less political turbulence with a declining youth bulge (proportion of the population between 15 and 29 years), the lower chance of experiencing a violent political transition and the increasing likelihood of being a liberal democracy as median age increases. Whereas the youth bulge in the rest of the world peaked at around 42% in 1980, Africa only reaches the 42% mark by about 2040.

Although the impact of the Demographics and Health scenario is significant, it is insufficient to reverse the Current Path forecast of growing divergence in average incomes between Africa and the rest of the world. The continent requires a consort of structural transitions to improve its development prospects, as discussed elsewhere on this website.

#### Chart 14: Key recommendations

## Recommendations

1. High fertility rates in sub-Saharan Africa constrain development
2. On current projections, the continent only enters a potential demographic dividend from mid-century
3. Meanwhile, others invest in labour-saving technology meaning that Africa's growing labour pool will contribute less to economic growth
4. Progress to a more rapid demographic transition requires political leadership, education and media campaigns on:
  - a. the benefits of smaller families
  - b. gender equality
  - c. dangers of child marriages and
  - d. unequal social and cultural norms

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## About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director of the ISS. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the ISS. 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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