



Demographics

Conclusion: Working towards Africa's demographic dividend

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This theme explains how Africa's high fertility rates and the rapid nature of urbanisation on the continent constrain development.

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 crucial for 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. Unlike these highly urbanised countries, Africa is coming from much lower levels, but urbanisation is rapidly increasing, so authorities will struggle to cope with the influx.

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, 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 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 in the second half of the 21st century. At that point, investments in labour-saving devices elsewhere will likely rob Africa of the chance to benefit from that potential dividend to the same extent as in China, the Asian Tigers and India. Elsewhere, the focus is on the contributions from capital and technology. Africans will have to work very hard to improve 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 that have had a less-than-average rate of fertility decline to date. Governments, especially those in low- and lower-middle-income countries, need to prioritise family planning 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.

Rapid urbanisation is particularly challenging given the rates at which it occurs in Africa. The population of Africa's urban

areas is increasing (due to high rates of urban fertility), and rates of in-migration of rural regions are accelerating for reasons examined elsewhere in this theme. Rapid urbanisation is outpacing urban coping capacity, resulting in urban sprawl of informal settlements, poor connectivity and high unemployment. Instead of offering advantages related to a more extensive pool of labour, more significant markets and the traditional benefits associated with urban population concentrations, some cities in West Africa are growing at more than 5% per annum, which is unmanageable. Africa must engage in national spatial planning, including providing infrastructure across development corridors and spreading urbanisation across secondary cities, not only to the capital or mega-city such as Kampala in Uganda, which produces 60% of the national GDP. Awareness at

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

Chart 14: Key recommendations

Recommendations:

- The governments of 28 African countries from Niger to Liberia need to prioritise family planning to advance a potential demographic dividend.
- The list includes Nigeria, the DR Congo, Tanzania and Uganda
- Policies include:
 - Political leadership on importance of smaller families
 - A partnership with traditional and religious leadership
 - Male and female education
 - Media campaigns on the benefits of smaller families
 - Policies that advance gender equity
 - Ending child marriages and unequal social and cultural norms
 - Widespread access to modern contraceptive
 - Primary health care
 - Investment in the provision of WaSH infrastructure

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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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