

Africa's greatest challenge is to reduce fertility

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Reducing high population growth was at the top of the international development agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, successful population programmes were implemented in Asia and Latin America and population growth fell from about 2.5 per cent per year in the 1960s to 1.2 per cent today. By contrast, benign neglect from African leaders and elites translated into late, weak and ineffective programmes and the population growth rate in sub-Saharan Africa has remained about 2.5 per cent per year over the past half century, except in southern Africa.

In part because of the success of the Asian and Latin American programmes, international attention has shifted to other urgent issues, such as the HIV/Aids epidemic, humanitarian crises and good governance. Recent concerns about climate change have further overshadowed the demographic dimensions of African development.

Yet unless the transition towards lower levels of fertility starts in earnest in sub-Saharan Africa, rapid population growth will jeopardise Africa's development efforts and its prospects for full integration into the world economy.

The large number of young Africans – 2 out of 3 people are under 25 – and persistent high fertility levels imply that population growth will continue despite the Aids epidemic. In mid-2007, sub-Saharan Africa had 788m people – 12 per cent of the world's population. This share will increase to 18 per cent in 2050, or 1.8bn people. This assumes that African women would then have 2.5 children on average, against 5.5 today, according to the United Nations 2006 population projections. However, these projections imply rapid declines in fertility levels that are far from guaranteed, except in southern Africa. Higher 2050 population figures, potentially reaching 2bn or more, are plausible if fertility declines more slowly.

Even so, demographic issues are conspicuously absent from the African development debate. African leaders, in particular, and their development partners, have been reluctant to address these issues directly. To be sure, the question of how to trigger fertility decline, particularly in rural areas, remains very difficult in a context of low female and male education attainments, gender inequality and poor management capacity. Programmes will need to be informed by gender concerns and work across sectors such as education, health and legal reforms.

Yet there is an urgent need to tackle fertility. First, slower population growth will help reduce the pressures countries face with food security, land tenure, environmental degradation and water supply. It will also ease the security problems that are often the result of conflicts over scarce resources, which are exacerbated by unsustainably high rates of population growth and widespread youth unemployment.

Second, growth rates in the order of 6 per cent per year translate into only half that level per capita because of the current pace of demographic growth. This jeopardises poverty reduction efforts and also prevents countries from achieving their “education for all” target, a prerequisite to development. Unless fertility declines, attainment of the millennium development goals will remain an ever-receding mirage. As the east Asia experience has shown, a slower rate of population growth leads to more favourable dependency ratios – limiting the number of child dependents on a comparatively larger, productive workforce.

Third, another urgent priority is to address high fertility levels from a gender and health perspective. Many African women, both urban and rural, are desperate to get contraceptives. However, they are prevented from doing so because of gender inequalities, cultural and religious traditions and inadequate family planning services. Addressing these unmet needs will greatly improve women’s health outcomes by lowering maternal mortality and enabling them to realise their own economic potential while also adding to Africa’s growth.

Slowing the pace of the demographic growth is a prerequisite to improving Africa’s human capital and its economic performance. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the highest level of leadership is changing, albeit timidly, its attitudes with respect to rapid population growth. By addressing these issues decisively, Africa’s leaders will be able to embrace the continent’s challenges, without the stigma of poverty, famine and civil strife that unfortunately still haunt too many sub-Saharan countries.

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