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Africa's Population Growth: a Development Challenge

Africa's population is growing at twice the rate of other regions. In the following interview, John May, a demographer at the World Bank, discusses the effects of population growth on Africa's development agenda and what the Bank is doing in response.

What is rapid population growth?

JM: The sub-Saharan population is growing at the rate of 2.5 percent per year as compared to 1.2 percent in Latin America and Asia. At that rate, Africa's population would double in 28 years. The reason for the fast population increase in Africa is the rapid decline in infant and child mortality, whilst fertility levels have remained high and are decreasing only slowly.

Today, African women bare 5.5 children on average during their lifetime, except in Southern Africa. The key issue is the lag between the infant and child mortality decline, on the one hand, and the fertility decline, on the other. The AIDS epidemic, despite all the development problems it brings to Africa, will not fundamentally change the demographic equation. For the first time in about two decades, the U.N. Population Division estimates that no one African country will experience a negative population rate of growth as a result of HIV/AIDS. This is because programs on HIV/AIDS are showing some results and estimates about the epidemic have been recalculated downwards. However, successes are still fragile and should not lead us to be complacent.

Why is rapid population growth a challenge for sub-Saharan Africa?

JM: It's a challenge for three major reasons. First, rapid population growth puts a lot of stress on ecosystems. Many different issues such as food security, land tenure, environmental degradation and water supply do have a demographic background. Civil strife is also often caused by population pressure on scarce resources. Secondly, rapid population growth impacts on the economy because governments need to provide human capital investments for their population -- education, health, etc. When population grows too fast such investments become logistically and financially very difficult to meet. In addition, rapid population growth may slow down the increase of income per capita. For example, if your economy expands at six percent per year but your population at three percent, your revenue per capita will expand at only three percent. The third issue is linked to the health of women and their children as well as the status of women in society. Pregnancies that are too early, too late and too many are not conducive to good health outcomes. African women used to space their children through abstinence and breastfeeding but these factors are now eroding because of urbanization and new lifestyles, whereas modern contraception has not yet replaced these traditional birth spacing methods.

Why has it been so difficult to discuss these issues in Africa?

JM: African leaders and elites have long had the perception that rapid population growth was not an issue because of the vastness of Africa, abundance of resources, relatively low population densities and, more recently, the threat of HIV/AIDS. In addition, the fact that Africa has suffered in the past from the slave trade and from colonization, which have also had major demographic impacts has also played a role in public perception. More recently, other pressing issues have surfaced as well, such as humanitarian crises, good governance and concerns about climate change; rapid population issues were not on the radar. The good news is this is gradually changing.

Can you give us some examples of population programs and how they work?

JM: The experience of Asia and Latin America has shown that female education, legal reform and access to family planning services have made a difference in many countries. Family planning programs alone have been able to reduce fertility by about one child per woman. Economic and social development is of course the best contraceptive but contraceptives are also good for development. This means that efforts to trigger a decline in fertility have to be holistic. A lot depends also on the level of commitment of the leadership. Tunisia, for example, started in the 1960s on a bold program that included huge strides in female education, provision of family planning and legal reform that have proven to be visionary. Tunisia at the time had a fertility level which was higher than most African countries today, and now has reached replacement level fertility, which is 2.1 children per woman.

What do critics of population programs say and how do you respond?

JM: More and more people agree that fertility levels are too high in Africa. A few naysayers still claim that Africa is under-populated or not populated enough to trigger economic development, that HIV/AIDS will wipe out a large portion of the population, etc. But these claims do not hold against the most recent evidence. What is really divisive is how to bring fertility levels down. The developmentalists point rightly to the importance of economic development. However, when fertility is so high and population growth so rapid we face kind of a vicious circle. Governments need to provide so many people with education and health services but the resources to provide those investments are just not there. Ideologies also come also into play sometimes, as well as social conservative thinking. My answer would be to let people, especially women, decide for themselves and to provide them with the means to exert their choices.

How does gender play a role in the population growth debate?

JM: It could be argued that the population issue in sub-Saharan Africa is in essence a gender issue. That is because women have little choice in the decision of child bearing. They often need to bare many children as a means of social recognition and economic survival. They are also poorly educated and family planning services are often inadequate. In many countries, age at marriage is still too low. Young girls become pregnant too early and face terrible consequences such as fistulae, which make them suffer and become social outcasts.

What is the World Bank doing to address population growth?

JM: The classic approach to population issues that has often been driven by family planning is giving way to a more subtle understanding of population growth and its social and economic consequences as brought about by the experience in East Asia. Remember that the "Asian

miracle" is attributable to a large extent (40 percent) to rapid declines in fertility and dramatic changes in the age structures. The Bank is currently adapting to this "new demography," which looks at age structures, dependency ratios, human capital investments and the demographic dividend. More economists are coming back to the demographic dimensions of development. Freestanding population projects are gradually replaced by new instruments that address population issues multi-sectorally. The challenge will be to inform these new approaches with the right demographic data and assessments. More and more African governments are looking for advice in the area of population. Our task is to help them effectively in what will remain a sensitive area as it touches on the roots of the social fabric of many societies.

Are there projects and programs in place to address the issue of population growth?

JM: The Bank is addressing the issue of data collection and statistical strengthening. It is doing research on population and gender issues and analytical work in several regions as well as for the world at large. Some strategic documents and analytical reports, such as Country Assistance Strategies and Country Economic Memorandums are also informed by demographic considerations. However, much more work is needed. The Bank has also prepared recently a Multi-sector demographic project in Niger, which has the highest fertility in the world with 7.1 children per woman. The Government of Niger has created a new Ministry of Population and has requested the help of the International Development Association. The major challenges are to build capacity, to make the right advocacy and sensitization campaigns and to implement effective interventions to trigger a decline in fertility. The task ahead is huge and difficult, however some concrete results have already been obtained such as the drafting of a sound new population policy, the launching of sensitization campaigns throughout the country, and the convening of a successful national forum on population, development and gender issues.