DEMOGRAPHY, URBANISATION AND MOBILITY

Myths, perspectives and debates on Africa’s demographic challenge

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Photography: "Fairness of a Father", Derrick Ofosu Boateng

Africa’s demographic outlook and limitless potential are currently constituting some of the most salient debates about the continent’s future. The prevailing narratives on the continent’s demographic prospects are negative and have primarily originated from a Eurocentric viewpoint. This article will explore alternative discourse on this issue whilst also highlighting the potential for a resilient African demographic. The article does not discount the reality of the numerous challenges facing demographics in Africa. Indeed, many of its challenges are consistent with a continent multifaceted in its culture, people and socioeconomic conditions. However, a generalist approach does not effectively portray the dynamics of the continent’s demography; it introduces an implicit bias which is pervasive in the application of Western lenses when viewing African demographic challenges.

As such, the crux of this author’s argument is to highlight African demography as resilient,

diverse and antithetical to the myopic views dominating discourse on Africa and its demographic challenges. To achieve this, this article will introduce the key issues facing African demography, and subsequently explore the dominant debates and perspectives on the issues.

Understanding Africa's demography and challenges

Africa's demography is complex to unpack. The continent is broadly divided into the Northern and Sub-Saharan regions. This distinction inherently brushes over the myriad socio-economic differences existing within Africa – Sub-Saharan Africa alone is home to forty-two mainland countries and nine small island states with very different economies, natural resources and populations. Indeed, the nations of Africa consist of such a diverse set of components that it is impossible to analyse in absolute terms the demographics of Africa as a continent. The challenges faced by most African countries are similar, however, with variations occurring in the degree and capacity of resilience towards these challenges. The most salient demographic challenges which can be applied broadly to African countries are as follows: 1. High Fertility rates, 2. Food security/Hunger, 3. Climate change, 4. High youth unemployment, and 5. High dependency ratio. These issues, whilst ubiquitous to the casual observer on Africa's challenges, require brief analysis to establish a basis to examine key debates and perspectives.

High fertility rates

High fertility rates in Africa contribute directly to the explosive nature of Africa's population growth. Fertility rates in Africa, particularly the Sub-Saharan region, are the highest anywhere in the world. Africa's fertility rate currently stands at 4.5 children per woman, a figure which whilst high, represents a significant drop-off from 6.6 children per woman just 40 years ago.

The prevalent argument among policy makers and some scholars is that Africa's fertility rates are not falling fast enough, in comparison to South and Eastern Asian demographic models, a situation which continues to drive population growth and consequently increase poverty levels as the population overwhelms available resources.

Climate change

Climate change is perhaps one of the most important issues facing Africa's demography, albeit one of the least recognized among policy makers and African governments. This is because it disproportionately affects the livelihoods of the most vulnerable populations. Climate change has decelerated the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), as vulnerable communities are susceptible to the socioeconomic impacts of natural disasters including flooding, displacement and environmental degradation. Hence, Africa's growing population, coupled with its rising poverty rates, makes it one of the more vulnerable regions to the adverse impacts of climate change. This is a situation which is compounded by the fact that Africa contributes the least to climate change inducing

activities but disproportionately bears the grunt of the impacts.

Food security

Food security is intrinsically linked to climate change. Africa is an agricultural continent, with two-thirds of employment deriving from agriculture [1]. Nonetheless, reliance on food imports has grown, and hunger is still pervasive. Yields per hectare have remained static and domestic production of food crops has struggled to keep up with population growth. As an example, between 1985 and 2005, cereal output climbed by 65% while population increased by 71 percent [2].

High youth unemployment

This is one of the most defining demographic issues associated with Africa. High youth unemployment is typically described as a 'youth boom' or 'youth bulge'. This phenomenon is characteristic of many of the world's poorest countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia whereby high levels of fertility have led to an overly youthful population structure. As such, Africa currently faces a conundrum: invest in its burgeoning youth population to accelerate economic growth and innovation, or rapid population growth combined with a lack of opportunities for young people will stymie progress in health, development and security.

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High dependency ratio

Dependency ratio can be defined as the number of young and old people in a demographic who are reliant on the current workforce for sustenance. A high dependency ratio is detrimental to economic growth as it tends to stifle any potential for investment and growth as disposable income is used to cater for the dependent populations. Sub-Saharan Africa recorded the highest ratio of non-working to working age population in 2016, thus constituting a key demographic challenge.

Key debates and perspectives

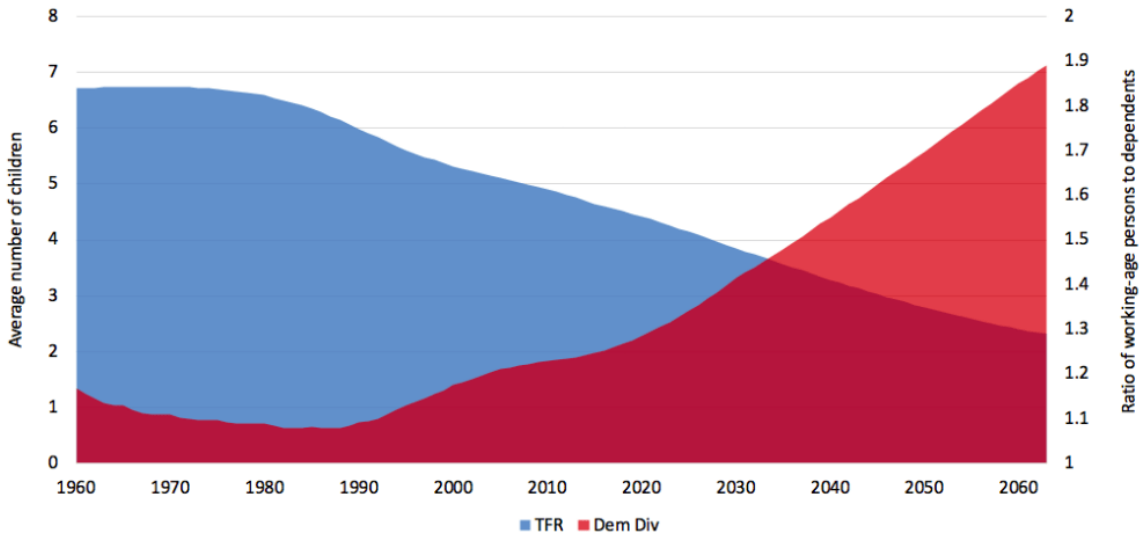
While acknowledging the numerous debates surrounding Africa's demographic prospects, this article focuses on those pertaining to Africa's population dynamics and the role they play towards African sustainable development. A dominant argument in existing literature pertains to the 'Malthusian trap' that Africa's population seemingly finds itself in. The recent gains made in healthcare, some argue, has led to increased population. This however

has not been accompanied by an increase in the standard of living. This is an age-old debate in social and health policy. Whilst scholars argue that an increase in the income of less developed countries will lead to significant gains in healthcare and an overall increase in the standard of living, others argue that income is more likely one of many factors which contributes to higher standards of living rather than a direct causative factor.

Another debate pertains to Africa's likelihood of attaining a demographic dividend. The World Bank estimates that Africa will account for 80 percent of the projected 4 billion increase in the global population by 2100. The resulting increase in its working-age population creates a scenario whereby increased growth and a higher rate of development can be wielded to achieve a demographic dividend. The 'demographic dividend' is a short- to medium-term economic gain that occurs due to the accelerated economic growth which may be gotten from a decline in a country's fertility rates and death rates and the subsequent change in the age structure of a country or region's demography.

Academics have posited a positive outlook for Africa's demographic prospects. Highlighting the need for coordinated policy, some scholars have pointed to consistent decline in fertility rates along with Africa's potential for untapped economic growth as indicators to suggest Africa can achieve substantial demographic dividends. However, not all forecasts are positive for the attainment of a demographic dividend in Africa. Whilst it is sometimes argued that the attainment of a demographic dividend is not likely at all, this article concerns itself with arguments put forward which suggest that even if a demographic dividend is achieved, it is unlikely to reap the expected benefits which have been previously expected.

Figure 1: Graph showing the total fertility rate vs the demographic dividend in Africa



Cilliers, J. (2018) "Africa's demographic challenge is a fact", *ISS Today* [Available online].

> The decidedly negative outlook on Africa's demographic dividend ignores the fact that African fertility rates are actually falling

The forecast in figure 1 shows projected estimates which suggest that Africa's future economic growth rate during its peak demographic dividend period is unlikely to achieve an average of 5% a year. If the ratio of working-age people to dependents remains low, it is unlikely that any meaningful gains in terms of employment and raised standards of living will be achieved. This perspective of African growth therefore takes a pessimistic view on African demographic prospects.

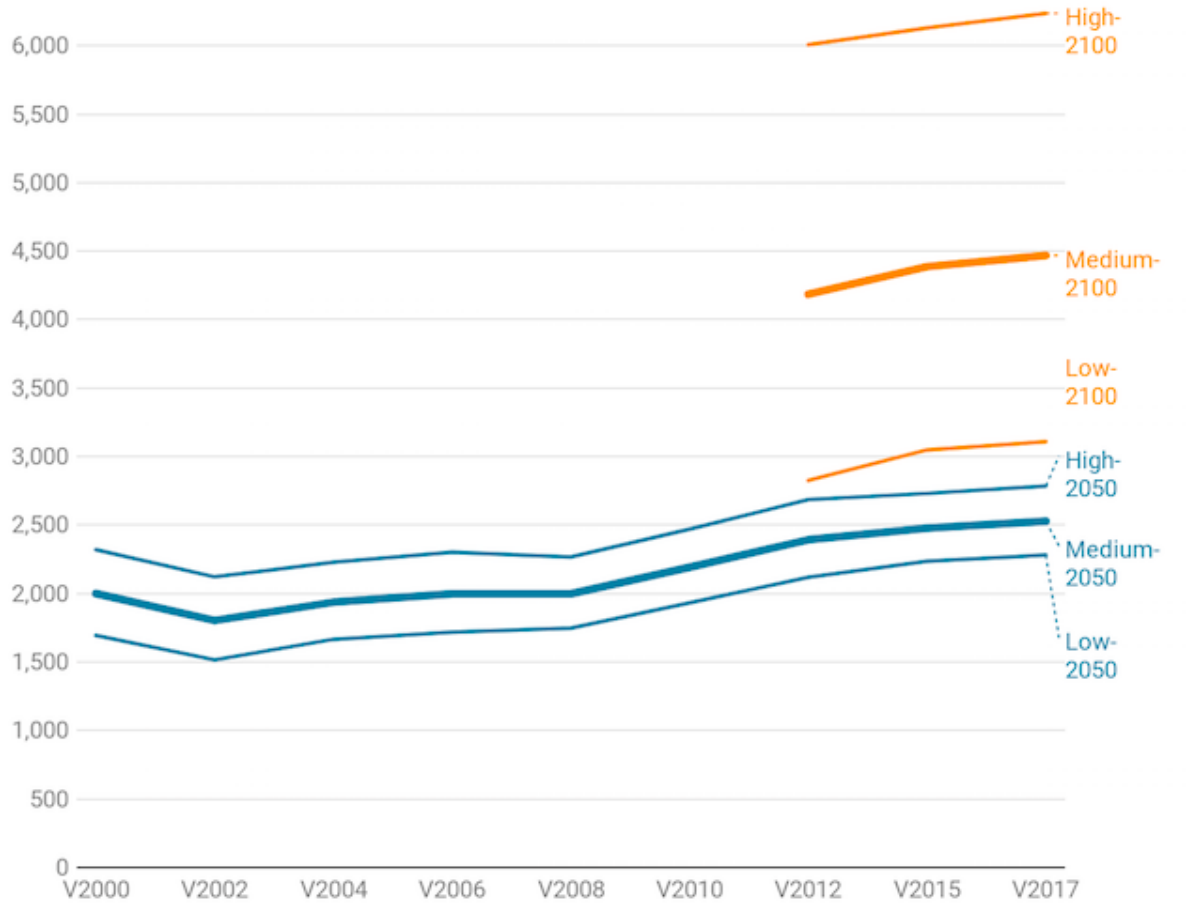
Challenging myths and negative stereotypes

A common myth among policy makers and civil societies relates to the application of tried and tested policies in other regions towards African demographic issues. This approach disregards the sociocultural differences between African countries as well as the role of religion in the African psyche. A good example of this is in relation to the use of similar fertility control policies which were used in China and other Tiger economies to rapidly reduce the fertility rate in order to achieve a demographic dividend. Forecasting of Africa's demographic trajectory based on expectations that it would follow the pattern of other regions has thus been badly misleading.

More importantly, the decidedly negative outlook on Africa's demographic dividend and the argument that Africa's high fertility rate is a key contributor to increasing poverty ignores the fact that African fertility rates are actually falling. There seems to be a wilful ignorance of this fact as the U.N continually overestimates how quickly Africa's fertility will decline. As a result, they continuously increase African population forecasts, because African fertility does not conform to their expectations.

Graph 2 illustrates the UN's Africa 2050 and 2100 population projections continuously increasing with each version (represented by V followed by the year) —a situation which is irrespective of the fact that African fertility has been in decline during that period—.

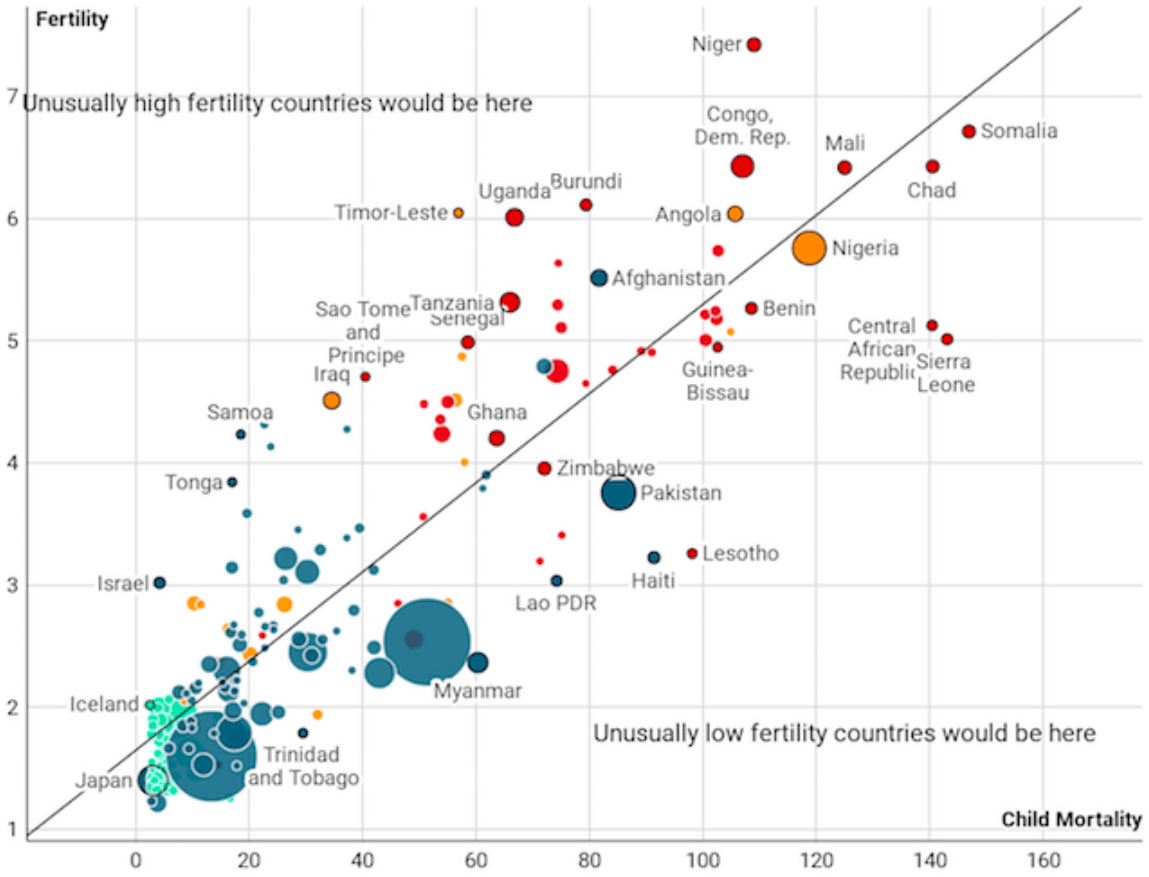
Figure 2: Graph showing the UN African population estimates for 2050 and 2100 between 2000 and 2017



Stone, L. (2018) "African Fertility is Right Where It Should Be" Institute for Family Studies' Blog [Available online].

The fixation on high fertility in Africa as a socioeconomic black hole is misplaced by Western policy makers because the use of fertility rates as the yardstick for measuring demographic transition is faulty. Firstly, child mortality plays a fundamental role in the rate of fertility in a region. And a key reason why African fertility rates do not conform to Western estimates is because child mortality in Africa is still comparatively high to other regions. The graph below shows the global comparison between fertility and child mortality in order to exemplify the integral nature of the relationship between both.

Figure 3: Graph showing a global comparison between fertility and child mortality (2016)



Stone, L. (2018) “African Fertility is Right Where It Should Be” Institute for Family Studies’ Blog [Available online].

As is observable in Figure 3, African fertility rates are on par with what is reasonably expected when compared with African child mortality rates. In fact, countries like Ghana and Zimbabwe have managed to attain comparatively low levels of both child mortality and fertility rates. The true problem is not that African fertility rates are disproportionately high, but that families are choosing to have more children to compensate for the equally high levels of infant mortality as observed in Somalia, Mali, Chad and Niger.

> Another myth is the argument that Africa faces an unprecedented youth employment challenge; easily debunked by a comparison of historical demographic data from Africa and the southern and eastern regions in Asia

Another myth is the argument that Africa faces an unprecedented youth employment challenge. This argument stems from the fact that Africa has a youth bulge, a situation which could potentially lead to increased levels of crime, insecurity and widespread hunger. This argument is easily debunked by a comparison of historical demographic data from Africa and the southern and eastern regions in Asia. This is because those regions 40 years ago had similar youth demographics to Africa but have managed and in some cases thrived irrespective of their demographic challenges. Africa’s youth bulge in the workforce peaked

in 2001 at around 38% (a mere 4 percentage points higher than that of Asia's Tiger economies) and has been declining ever since. Furthermore, the percentage of youth in relation to the working age population in Africa at its zenith was 50% less than that of East Asia. Hence, if these regions could go through a sustained period of high levels of a youth bulge without significant crisis, it is not unreasonable to expect that Africa should be able to attain a similar feat.

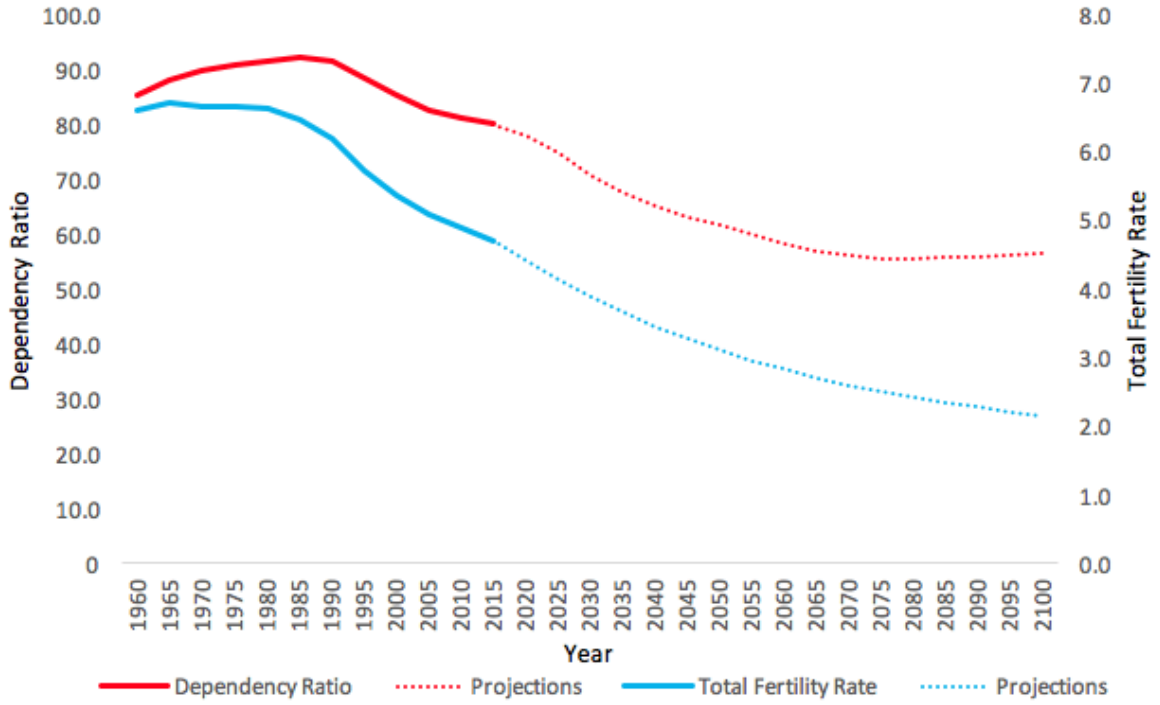
An alternate view of Africa's demographic prospects

Demographic trends can be influenced by economic and social welfare policies if wielded appropriately by governments and as shown by other regions' experience, can be turned into development opportunities. Africa's capacity for demographic resilience is hardly expounded upon. This is surprising given the Asian demographic experience over the last 40 years. The tendency to paint Africa's population as merely bystanders rather than capable actors in the face of demographic challenges needs to be revised. An alternate view of Africa's demographic prospects is proffered- the challenges which Africa face are springboards for opportunity rather than predetermined fatalistic conclusions, and the continent is reimagined with full agency in its demographic processes.

Towards a demographic dividend

In order to enjoy the benefits of the demographic dividend, it is important to highlight that African nations, and key strategy actors must enact deliberate policies targeting demographic betterment. These could range from easy access to quality health and education infrastructures, and provision of high and semi-skilled work . It is important to note at this juncture that a one size fits all solution does not exist. Indeed, the solutions which could lead to the achievement of a demographic dividend are as varied as Africa's demography itself. African's potential for a sizable demographic dividend. Africa's dependency ratios and fertility rates have continued a downward trend which has given renewed optimism among African leaders and afro-oriented institutions. The graph below shows the declining rate of total fertility and the reduction of dependency ratio. It also shows future projections for fertility and dependency in Africa.

Figure 4: Graph showing Africa's total fertility rate



As shown by the graph above, Africa's fertility rate will continue to fall which, in tandem, will reduce the dependency ratio until the middle of the 21st century. This expected development gives rise to hope that demography can usher in an era of sustained economic development in the decades to come. Africa's rising population and urbanization offer a chance to reach a critical juncture towards more sustainable socioeconomic growth and prosperity. Around 70% of Africa's urbanised regions and cities are yet to be developed. Owing to changing demographics and the continent's urbanization pace. It allows the private and public sectors to work together and invest in people, communities, and cities.

The Youth Bulge; a blessing in disguise

Africa's high youth populations have the capacity to transform the socioeconomic and political landscape of Africa. Whilst there is no denying that the combination of few job opportunities and a large number of youths creates the risk of social unrest, the potential for innovation and entrepreneurship amongst Africa's youth must not be discounted. The last decade has given rise to an exponential increase in the number of start-ups in Africa, making the continent an increasingly attractive destination for investment and business opportunities. These start-ups, many of which are spearheaded by young, ambitious and resourceful Africans, has evolved to become the continent's engine driving development and economic growth.

Building demographic resilience

The capacity for demographic resilience is a key aspect that is overlooked in the perspectives and debates on African's demographic challenges. A shining example of this is the potential for resilience in the face of climate change and food security issues. A regional approach to ecosystem-based adaptation can be a flexible and cost-effective strategy for tackling food security issues. This approach strengthens Africa's resilience to adverse

impacts and helps to preserve and restore key natural resources on which populations rely, particularly the poor. A good example of this is the restoration of mangroves in Mozambique's Xai-Xai District, which restored the ecosystem and boosted fisheries production and yields. Another example is the introduction of the Za Pit method (putting a combination of dirt and manure in tiny pits in degraded fields) in the Sahel to improve soil fertility.

There is a need to shield vulnerable communities from the hazards of climate change. This should be considered a high priority issue as it poses a significant threat to any community building or demographic strengthening which has been suggested. Governance at local and national levels must integrate the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction or other such anti- disaster policies in Africa, so as to insulate vulnerable communities from the risks associated with climate change.

Women and children; the key to demographic transition

Africa's demographic prospects will be greatly enhanced if women and children's livelihoods are improved. There is a need to increase female education and foster gender equity and equality. This is because women who have semi formal or formal education tend to have fewer and healthier children. Poverty in Africa is gendered, with a disproportionate number of women lacking access to basic social amenities.

> Cogent policies directly targeted at Africa's socioeconomic challenges, coupled with a harnessing of its burgeoning youth population could drastically change the outlook on Africa's demographic prospects in a few short years

This gender inequality contributes to Africa's demographic challenge in two ways; first, it stifles socio economic growth as a significant proportion of the demographic cannot contribute to the development process. Secondly, it limits the impact of other initiatives which could be used to enhance a demographic dividend. The aforementioned demographic resilience is unachievable without the socio-economic empowerment of women. As an example, many communities involved in small scale eco strengthening as mentioned in the previous paragraphs are women-led. As such empowering them to improve their communities' adaptability is very important to the climate change adaptability of the continent. Furthermore, it is important to note that the assimilation of better healthcare and family planning practices are increasingly spearheaded by women led families and communities; contrary to the dictates of male dominated social norms on the continent.

Conclusion

This article has sought to highlight the challenges, debates and prospects of Africa's demography. Whilst Africa is behind the curve in terms of its demographic transition, and its numerous challenges could potentially to lead to detrimental consequences for economic development and growth, the opportunities for development are limitless. Cogent policies directly targeted at Africa's socioeconomic challenges, coupled with a harnessing of its burgeoning youth population could drastically change the outlook on Africa's demographic prospects in a few short years. A key starting point however is the realization that there is indeed potential for growth; myths and negative stereotypes only serve to further muddle an already complicated roadmap towards Africa reaping its demographic dividends.

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2 — Ibídem.



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