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The baby bonanza

Is Africa an exception to the rule that countries reap a “demographic dividend” as they grow richer?

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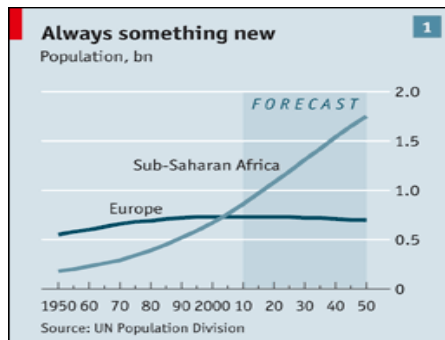


IN JABI village, on the Juba River in southern Somalia, the mothers are mostly girls. They marry as early as 14 and have their first baby soon after. Their duties barely advance them above a donkey: childbearing and rearing, working in the fields, fetching water from the crocodile-infested river, sweeping faeces from the straw huts. Most have been raggedly circumcised. They have no contraception. There is no school. How many women in the village have died giving birth? “We cannot count the number,” blurts out Asha Hussein; she and the other women weep.

To most people, this is the familiar Africa, a place of large families and high fertility, a continent in which societies are under extreme stress and where the young massively outnumber the old. Teeming, environmentally degraded, ravaged by poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDS and civil war, Africa appears the most plausible candidate ever to suffer a Malthusian disaster.

Yet there is another Africa, an Africa whose people are charting a course more similar to that of the rest of the world: one where they are living longer, having fewer children, and in which more of their children are surviving infancy. Cities are restraining population growth, just as they have in Asia and Latin America. Addis Ababa, Accra, Luanda, may be fetid in parts—shockingly so for those coming from richer countries—but they have low fertility. An emergent African middle class is taking out mortgages and moving into newly built flats—and two children is what they want.

Africa is still something of a demographic outlier compared with the rest of the developing world. Long berated (or loved) as the sleepest continent, it has now become the fastest-growing and fastest-urbanising one. Its population has grown from 110m in 1850 to 1 billion today. Its fertility rate is still high: the average woman born today can expect to have five children in her child-bearing years, compared with just 1.7 in East Asia. Barring catastrophe, Africa’s population will reach 2 billion by 2050. To get a sense of this kind of increase, consider that in 1950 there were two Europeans for every African; by 2050, on present trends, there will be two Africans for every European (see chart 1).



Yet Africa is also starting out, a little late, on a demographic transition that others have already traced: as people get richer, they have fewer children. In 1990 the continent's total fertility rate was over six, compared with two in East Asia. By 2030, according to United Nations projections, the total fertility rate in sub-Saharan Africa could fall to three. By 2050 it could be below 2.5. It is surely no coincidence that the past 15 years have seen Africa's fastest-ever period of economic growth. Africa, exceptional in so many ways, does not seem to be an exception to the rule that, as countries get richer, they experience a demographic transition.

That could outweigh all the bad news about civil war, desertification and HIV/AIDS. As societies grow richer, and start to move from high fertility to low, the size of their working-age population increases. The effect is a mechanical one: they have fewer children; the grandparents' generation has already died off; so they have disproportionately large numbers of working-age adults. According to a study by the Harvard Initiative for Global Health*, the share of the working-age population will rise in 27 of 32 African countries between 2005 and 2015.

The result is a "demographic dividend", which can be cashed in to produce a virtuous cycle of growth. A fast-growing, economically active population provides the initial impetus to industrial production; then a supply of new workers coming from villages can, if handled properly, enable a country to become more productive. China and East Asia are the models. On some calculations, demography accounted for about a third of East Asia's phenomenal growth over the past 30 years.

Africa's people are its biggest asset. One day, its workforce could be as lusty and vital as Asia's—especially compared with that of necrotic Europe. But there is nothing inevitable about the ability to cash in the demographic dividend. For that to happen, Africa will have to choose the right policies and overcome its many problems. If a country fails to address those problems, then the demographic dividend could become a burden. Instead of busy people at work, there will be restless, jobless young thugs; instead of prosperity, there will be crime or civil unrest.

Africa does not have much time to get things right. The period of greatest potential, when the working-age population is disproportionately large, is not open-ended. In demographic terms, it is just a moment or two. Societies age, and as they do the number of older dependents grows and the moment passes.

Africa has a generation or two to show whether it is, indeed, a demographic outlier as pessimists fear—one in which the dividend turns into a curse—or whether it is able to follow

the path blazed by East Asia and reap the benefits of changing population patterns. Can Africa capitalise on the demographic dividend?

Malthus's fears

There are three main reasons for pessimism. The first is that even today it struggles to provide for its people. Africa's population is still growing, remember, even if more slowly because fertility is falling. And it still faces the classic constraints, identified by Thomas Malthus in the 19th century, of land and water.

Africa today produces less food per head than at any time since independence. Farms are getting smaller, sometimes farcically so. Dividing village plots among sons is like cutting up postage stamps. The average smallholding of just over half an acre (0.25 hectares) is too small to feed a family—hence the continent's widespread stunting. Africa's disease burden extends to its animals and crops. Bananas, for example, are subject to two diseases—bunchy top disease and bacterial wilt disease—which can ruin 80% of a harvest. Scientists reckon 30m people who depend on the fruit are at risk; many of them live in conflict zones such as eastern Congo.

If it is to feed its people, Africa badly needs a green revolution. In those parts with plentiful rainfall and rich soil—wet Africa—the prognosis is reasonably good. But in bigger dry Africa, such as in Jabi village, efforts to replicate Asia's green revolution have so far failed. This is partly because Asia used large cropping systems and irrigation, which are unsuited to dry Africa. Partly, it is because African leaders and foreign donors have been almost equally indifferent to smallholder farmers and simple improvements to soil and seeds. Even if policy were right, small farms are slower than large ones to adopt better crops and farming methods.

The task of providing for hungry and thirsty people will be complicated by climate change—a big difference from the demographic transitions in Asia and Latin America. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change thinks Africa will be the continent hardest hit. Even its best-case scenario (an increase in global temperatures of 1.1-2.9°C by 2100) could be ruinous. Equatorial glaciers will melt and river-flows fall, even as demand for water rises. The United Nations Environment Programme says 75m-250m Africans could go thirsty. That will mean girls will spend longer walking to fetch water which could encourage them to drop out of school and bear children earlier. On some estimates, an area of cultivable land the size of France, Germany, Italy and Britain combined will be ruined. The International Livestock Research Institute says large parts of Africa may soon be too dry for grazing, leading to conflicts between rival cattle herders or, as in Sudan's Darfur region, between herders and settled farmers.

These are predictions, not certainties. They do not necessarily mean the land cannot be made to support more people. Tree cover in southern Niger, for example, has increased tenfold since the devastating droughts of the 1970s. A government decision to let farmers, rather than the state, own the trees, has made them more valuable by allowing locals to capture the benefits of harvesting bark, branches, seeds and fruits, meaning that locals are less likely to cut them down. Trees limit soil erosion; some "fix" the soil with nitrogen.

Elsewhere, though, the losses are huge. Forests in Kenya have shrunk by at least 60% since 1990, mainly because more people are cutting down trees for fuel. It is doubtful whether Kenya's government is strong enough to save the Mau forest on which Nairobi depends for water and hydroelectric power. And if Kenya cannot save a forest on which its capital depends, what hope is there for Congo's rainforest?

Thanks to its demographic transition, Africa will suffer less from these afflictions than it otherwise would. But it cannot remove them altogether, because the continent's population will continue to grow, albeit more slowly. The hunger, poverty and strife this causes could gravely limit the demographic dividend.

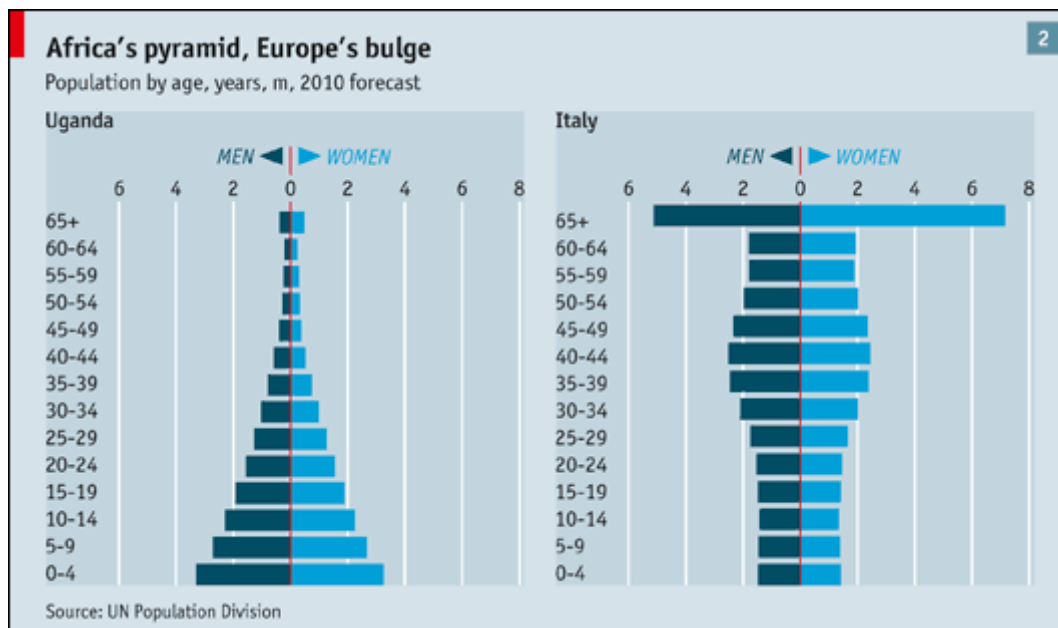
Which leads to the second reason for pessimism: Africa's families are under greater strain than Asia's or Latin America's were when their demographic transitions first began. That means, pessimists fear, that African countries may fail to navigate the virtuous cycle of industrialisation, growing employment, increasing productivity and prosperity.

One African in two is a child. The numbers are such that traditional ways of caring for children in extended families and communities are breaking down. In southern Africa, as a result of HIV/AIDS, an increasing number of families are headed by children. A recent report by the African Child Policy Forum, an advocacy group, says there are now 50m orphaned or abandoned children in Africa. It thinks the number could rise to 100m, meaning misery for them and more violent crimes for others.

Millions of children already live rough in towns and cities. Prostitution and death await the poorest girls. The boys take to glue and crime. Africa has the highest rate of child disablement in the world. Some think 10-20% may be disabled, a staggering number, but since they are rarely seen in clinics and schools that is hard to verify. Paediatricians suspect some are killed in infancy—not Darwin's natural selection but the dispensing of an extra mouth to feed. Physical stunting is probably rising.

Throughout Africa the burden of disease weighs heavily. Between them, malaria and HIV/AIDS account for about a third of the continent's 10m deaths each year. In the ten years to 1995, more than 4m Africans died of AIDS and many countries have ten times as many people living with HIV as have died. Most are between 20 and 59. So HIV/AIDS is damaging that very section of the population—working-age adults—on which the demographic dividend depends.

If young people do not get jobs, or some stake in society, they may turn to violence. A Norwegian demographer, Henrik Urdal, reckons a country's risk of conflict rises four percentage points for every one-point increase in the youth population. So Africa's pyramids, wide at childhood and adolescence, are more promising than, say, barren Italy's (see chart 2), but also more combustible. In some cities the rate of unemployment is 70%. The unemployed are recruited into militias or gangs for the price of a day's wage. There was evidence of this after last year's Kenyan elections, when politicians and businessmen stood accused of paying young men to turn parts of the country into war zones. Lots of underemployed young people mean too many hotheads and not enough elders. Paul Collier, an Africa specialist at Oxford University, thinks that in such circumstances young African men are "very dangerous".



The third reason for pessimism is Africa's political violence, corruption and weak or non-existent governing institutions. According to the Harvard study, "institutional quality [is vital] for converting growth of the working-age share into a demographic dividend." Here the continent scores much more poorly than Asia or Latin America did in the 1960s or 1980s.

In the worst cases, civil war has meant that the demographic transition has not even begun. Fertility in Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone—all torn apart by internecine fighting—has barely fallen. In Congo the rate is still six, just as it was in 1950. In the worst places, fecundity tends to track instability. Africa's highest fertility rates are in the refugee and internally displaced camps in Sudan and Somalia, then in those countries recovering from war, then in famine-pocked patches of desert and scrub stretching from Mauritania to Kenya.

Some Africa-watchers fear that parts of the continent may be getting trapped in a downward spiral: more babies mean more competition for resources, more instability—and more babies. Jared Diamond, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, thinks bits of the continent are already suffering a Malthusian collapse of a sort. The Rwandan genocide, in his view, was a result of too many people pressing on too little land, all overlaid with political tension. Recent collapses in parts of Mauritania, Chad, Sudan, Somalia and Kenya, to name a few, are taken by neo-Malthusians to have their roots in overpopulating marginal land, compounded by political failure.

Yet such events also serve as reminders of how much can change. Twenty five years ago, Mozambique and Namibia were also being torn apart by war and Ghana was lurching from coup to coup. Now, these countries are peaceful, prospering and likely to benefit from the demographic dividend.

Confounding Malthus

Given half a chance, Africa shows what Malthus himself underestimated: innovation. The leapfrogging of decrepit state telecoms by profitable mobile telephone companies is one

example. A basket of new technologies including wind and solar power stations, biofuel cookers and rainwater tanks could improve prospects for many rural Africans. Only 4% of the continent's farmland is irrigated. Double that amount, add in fertilisers, seed, credit, information and proper metal warehouses (in some places a quarter of the harvest may be lost to rot and rats), and Africa might not just fill its own 2 billion stomachs, but export farm produce as well.

Emerging Asia and Latin America have been able to absorb much greater numbers of people thanks to urbanisation. Africa's rate of urbanisation is the fastest the world has ever seen, says Anna Tibaijuka, the head of Habitat, the UN agency responsible for urban development. In 1950 only Alexandria and Cairo exceeded 1m people. When the city rush is done, Africa may have 80 cities with more than 1m people, plus a cluster of megacities headed by Kinshasa, Lagos and Cairo—none of which show signs of mass starvation. Intermediary towns of 50,000-100,000 people will soak up most of those coming from the countryside. Urbanisation is part of the solution to Africa's demographic problems, not a manifestation of them.



Will the next generation be better off?

Indeed, it is an open question whether demography should really be considered an African problem—or one of its advantages. Over the past year, the continent has had the fastest economic growth per person in the world, partly because it has been somewhat less affected by the collapse of world trade, but partly because of the small increases countries are seeing in the number of people of working age.

The UN Population Division points out that Africa's overall population is 8% lower today than it would have been if its fertility rate had stayed at its 1970s level. And the trend towards lower fertility is likely to accelerate. The use of modern contraceptives in sub-Saharan Africa is only 12% (though it has doubled since 1994). In Somalia it is 1%. By comparison, the rate in Asia and Latin America is over 40%, so contraceptive use is likely to rise sharply.

Demography needs to be put in perspective. It is not destiny. Africa needs a green revolution; more efficient cities; more female education; honest governments; better economic policies. Without those things, Africa will not reap its demographic dividend. But without the transition that Africa has started upon, the continent's chances of achieving those good things would be even lower than they are. Demography is a start.

* [Realizing the Demographic dividend: is Africa any different?](#) By David E. Bloom and others.

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