

Africa: Failure is not an Option

Dr. Hans Groth, President, World Demographic & Ageing Forum (WDA Forum), St. Gallen/Switzerland

There is no doubt: Africa will dominate global population dynamics in the 21st century. While public attention is still focused on Asia as a fast-growing and prospering market with currently 4.5 billion inhabitants, today's one billion sub-Saharan Africans have significantly outpaced Asia in terms of population growth (2.6% vs. 1.1% in 2016, respectively).

The main reason for this ongoing population growth in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is a sharp decline in infant and child mortality while birth rates have been high for years (the fertility rate per woman was 5.1 in 2013 compared to 6.7 in 1970), while infant mortality declined rapidly from 138 deaths per thousand births in 1970 to 67 in 2013. Today, one billion people or 16% of the world population live in SSA. By 2050, they will double and in 2100, 3.9 billion people or 39% of the world's population could live in the region. This is the official forecast according to the Medium variant of the 2015 United Nations Population Projections.

A key issue today is the formulation of policies that would help Africa to replicate the conditions that have enabled East Asian countries to prosper and capture a "demographic dividend" (DD) during the period covering the early 1960s to the 1990s. The DD is defined as an accelerated economic growth triggered by the decline in a country's birth and death rates and the relative increase in working-age adults. However, to open this demographic window of opportunity, public policies will need to manage a rapid and significant decline in fertility in order to reduce the number of young dependents.

In addition, 3 other topics are critical to capture this one-time opportunity in a sustainable manner:

Africans urgently need jobs. There will be no demographic dividend without new jobs. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), 18 million new jobs are needed every year till 2050. For just one year, this is equivalent to the population of the Netherlands. From now until 2050, the new jobs required are almost equivalent to the entire European population. The prerequisites to achieve this are education and training, followed by investment based on trustworthy conditions.

Africa needs continued health investment and improvement. The window of opportunity for a demographic dividend only appears when fertility declines significantly and rapidly. This depends on further improvements of women's and children's rights and health outcomes. Making sure that women meet their reproductive health needs is a key priority.

Failure is not an option. A bad outcome would challenge both Africa and the global community. Not succeeding in capturing a demographic dividend in Africa would lead to millions of people living in poverty and in slums. It would result in a restless young population and facilitate human suffering and social disruptions that could spill over well beyond Africa.

Reference

Hans Groth & John F. May "Africa's Population: In Search of a Demographic Dividend", Dordrecht: Springer Publishers, 2017 (ISBN 978-3-319-46887-7).