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L'Afrique et les défis du XXIème siècle
Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century
A África e os desafios do Século XXI

إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

**Africa's Population Dynamics in the 21st Century:
Rethinking Demography as Opportunity**

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Abstract

The 21st century presents an African demographic profile which is older, more urbanised, and increasingly mobile, has fewer children, lives longer and has huge demographic dividends arising from higher fertility in the past. Six demographic issues will dominate Africa's demographic landscape in the 21st century; population momentum, growth of the urban population; population ageing; demographic dividend; declines in teenage childbearing and increasing longevity. What opportunities can Africa gain from this demographic profile?

In this paper, we use data from the UN, World Bank, Population Reference Bureau and The World Health Organisation, to show that 21st Century African demography provides opportunities for development of the continent. We propose a radical rethinking of African demography, which focuses on the positive, rather than the demonization of African population that prevailed in the 20th Century. We argue that while the 20th century was about African population control, an obsessive concern about the negative aspects of African international migration as well as unhealthy focus on the sexual dimensions of HIV and AIDS, the 21st Century should be about harnessing African demography for the good of the continent. We provide a short portrait of the positive aspects of African demography in few paragraphs below.

By examining fertility and mortality trends, indications are that Africa is now some years into a demographic transition. Declining fertility and mortality rates create opportunities in terms of **demographic dividend**, in the form of a proportionately larger population of young adults compared to that children and elderly people because fertility and mortality rates have fallen. Young adult economically cost less in terms of upkeep and have the potential to contribute more to the economy than children and older persons. If appropriately used, this short window of opportunity created by high fertility in the past can be used to spur development in the continent.

Trends and levels of population growth rates show that in the 21st Century, **population momentum** will play a more significant role, overtaking the impact that population growth played in the 20th Century. The high population growth rates in the 20th century created an

inbuilt momentum that will sustain population increase in Africa, even if current population growth rates remain stagnant or decline. A sustained decline in population will only occur when the momentum has burned itself out. The most critical issue of this situation is that *population momentum cannot be controlled by reducing fertility*, but rather through ensuring the quality of life of current populations. An opportunity then arises for Africa to refocus resources away from population control (in all its various disguises) to quality of life in the 21st Century.

Africa's **urban population growth rate** will increase substantially in the 21st century. The United Nations estimated that the African urban population grew from 14% in the 1950's to 34% at the end of 20th century and is projected to reach 62% by 2050 (United Nations,2010). The main challenge is that most of this urban growth will not be due to natural increase (the difference between birth rates and deaths rates) but rather due to the impact of rural to urban migration. Such kind of growth is difficult to plan for, and has the potential to cause civil unrest in urban areas. To address the problem of excessive urban population growth, African countries have the opportunity in the 21st century to shift away from *colonial planning*. The Africa of the 21st century must recognise that the rural-urban dichotomy is a colonial creation and begin urban planning that is holistic. African countries will be forced acknowledge the complementarity of the rural-urban rather than its oppositional characteristic.

Like all other world regions, Africa will not escape from the problem of **population ageing** in the 21st century. Driven by falling fertility rates and increases in life expectancy at the end of 20th century, both the proportions of aged persons and elderly persons will increase. Challenges will arise in terms of old age and frail care, as well provision of pensions. However increasing emigration of educated people from Africa in the 20th century means that there is room to make use of older qualified persons without sticking to prescribed retirement ages. In addition, research in different African countries has shown that older persons tend to want to retire in rural areas. Opportunities for providing grants to allow older persons re-engage with agriculture could be taken. This will allow older Africans to experience active, healthy and dignified ageing while contributing to the economy through agriculture.

Data on fertility levels and trends show that the continent will experience falling fertility rates in the 21st century. The largest **declines will be in teenage childbearing**. Declines in teenage childbearing mean less risky births and reduction in infant and child mortality. From a gender perspective, a reduction in teenage childbearing also means freeing a large number of young women who can contribute actively to the economy.

Increasing life expectancy will be another opportunity available to Africa in the 21st century. Life expectancy at birth increased from 38 years in the 1950's to 52 years by the end of the 20th century and is projected to rise to 67 years by 2050. The increases in life expectancy at birth are due to declines in infant and childhood mortality.

Our paper will provide empirical evidence in the form of demographic data, rates, levels and trends to highlight the opportunities provided by African demography in the 21st Century.