

Empowering Africa's youth The new focus of EU-Africa cooperation

SUMMARY

Africa is the world's youngest continent. With a rapidly growing population, Africa is forecast to make up for much of the population decline in other parts of the world in the coming decades. As a result, by 2050, one in four working-age persons in the world could be African. Today, over 60 % of Africans are under the age of 25. This demographic dynamism brings enormous challenges and opportunities. If well managed, it could drive an African economic miracle, which will shape the history of the 21st century. On the other hand, such unprecedented demographic growth does not come without specific challenges: the numerous children and young people must have their educational and health needs met, and enough jobs have to be created for the large cohorts entering the labour market every year. Large generations of young people who are politically excluded and deprived of economic opportunities can be an aggravating factor in conflicts, and can be prone to political and religious radicalisation. Instability and increasing poverty would also lead to mass migration to Europe and elsewhere.

Europe cannot ignore the rising challenges and opportunities at its southern borders. Positive or negative spill-overs to Europe will be inevitable. It is therefore in the EU's own interest to help the continent steer the demographic boom towards an economic boom, providing young people with opportunities, alleviating poverty and bringing lasting peace and stability. As the EU prepares to redefine its cooperation with Africa, the issue of youth is thus inescapable. The most urgent challenge for the EU is to channel foreign investment and development efforts towards Africa's youngest populations, which are more than ever located in its most fragile states.



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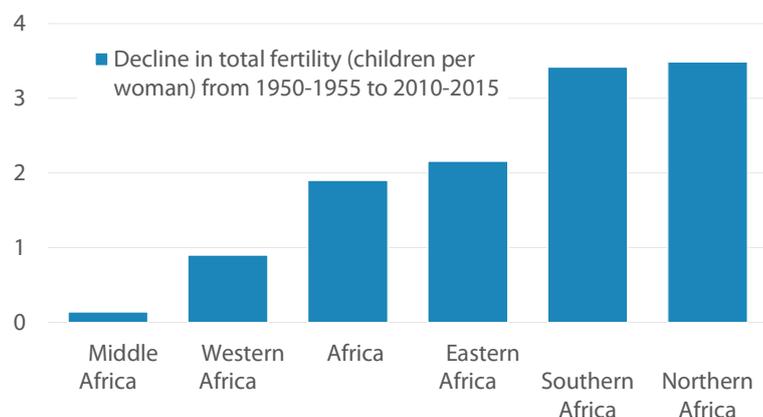
Background

Relations between the EU and Africa, at continental level, are guided by the [Joint Africa-EU Strategy](#) adopted in 2007, which establishes the general framework for cooperation. More concrete priorities for cooperation are spelled out periodically in guiding documents adopted by the Heads of State or Government from all EU and African countries. This will also be one of the objectives of the Abidjan High Level EU-Africa summit, to be held on 29 and 30 November 2017. The focus of this year's summit will be on youth. In preparation for this summit, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission have published a [joint communication](#) outlining priorities from the EU perspective.

The demographic challenge

Between 1950 and 2015, Africa's population has increased almost fivefold, compared to a threefold increase for the entire planet during the same period, and Africa is continuing on a diverging demographic [trajectory](#). While in most other world regions, birth rates have fallen close to or even below the population replacement level, in Africa the trend is different and will likely remain so for some time to come. While in North Africa population growth, although robust, is and will remain more moderate, according to the most likely scenario developed by the United Nations ('the medium variant'),¹ sub-Saharan Africa's population is projected to more than double by 2050, from 1.02 billion in 2017 to 2.17 billion, and then to almost double again by the end of the century. This is due to a multiplicity of factors: social and religious values favouring large families, the economic importance of having numerous children for agricultural work, disinterest of authorities in promoting family planning and reproductive rights, and lack of access to contraception, as well as low levels of education and economic empowerment of women.

Figure 1 – Decline in fertility in Africa



Data source: UN [World Population Prospects](#).

On a purely theoretical scenario, if today's fertility rate were to remain constant, Africa's entire population would rise to the staggering number of 16 billion by the end of this century (according to UN forecasts) – a population the entire Earth could hardly sustain.² In practice, fertility rates have been declining, albeit very slowly and unequally at regional level. In the two regions, which host a significant share of Africa's population, Central Africa and

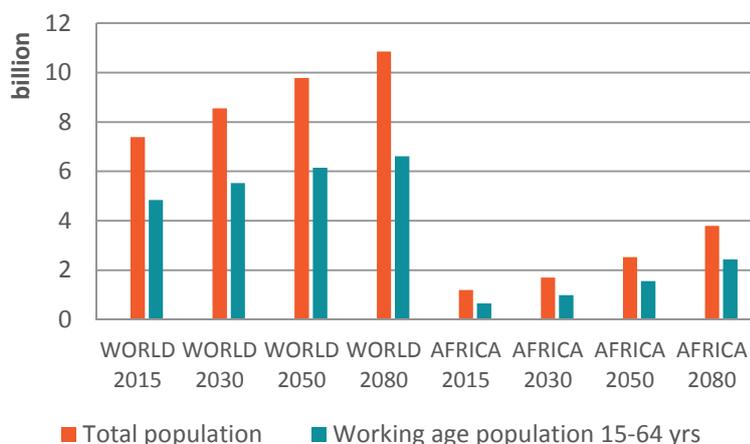
Western Africa, fertility rates per woman have declined very little from 1950 to 2015, to, respectively, 5.9 and 5.5 children per women according to UN data. This slight decline is very unevenly distributed among individual countries. The most fragile states have not yet entered or are only at the beginning of their demographic transition. While much lower, in North Africa, fertility has rebounded in the 2010-2015 period compared to the previous five years. This clearly shows the huge demographic potential of the continent. Even if fertility rates were to fall very quickly – another purely theoretical scenario – the

population would continue to grow fast, because of 'demographic momentum', making further demographic growth in Africa a certainty.

Therefore, the continent will be the demographic engine of the world in the 21st century, and most of the increase in world population will likely come from Africa. One in four working-age persons in the world should be African by 2050³ – a chance for Africa to become the new 'economic power house' of the world in the 21st century.

However, the impact of population growth will vary from place to place, as some regions will be able to accommodate larger populations easily. Africa's land mass is huge, being roughly equivalent to that of the USA, the EU, China, India, Mexico and Japan – places

Figure 2 – Total population and working age population forecasts: Africa versus the world

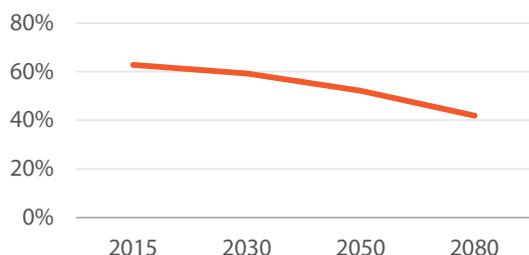


which are home to more than three times Africa's current population). Many countries on the continent still have relatively low, or even very low, population densities. Africa has more than half of the world's uncultivated agricultural land. However, some places are already experiencing demographic pressures, for example areas affected by desertification and/or deforestation such as in the Sahel, or by the

Data source: UN [World Population Prospects](#), Medium variant.

fragmentation of agricultural plots, such as in Rwanda and Burundi. In such places, young people will have difficulties continuing the agricultural production model of their parents, and will have either to update their cultivation methods or look for income elsewhere.

Figure 3 – Proportion of Africans under the age of 25



The most visible effect of quick demographic growth is the large share of young people in the total population which poses specific challenges to the societies in which they live, particularly relating to education, health and employment as further explained in this briefing. Currently, over 60 % of Africans are under the age of 25 and this proportion will decrease only slowly in the foreseeable future.

Data source: UN [World Population Prospects](#), Medium variant.

The political dimension

Through their sheer numbers, young people are a political force to be reckoned with at the polls. However, political life in many African countries is still dominated by old elites, and young people are largely absent from positions of power. Their link with politics is as ambivalent in Africa as in many other places in the world. While youth have recently spearheaded political transformation in several countries on the continent, such as in several northern and western African countries, it is no less true that their continuous

and formal political engagement is often absent. There is evidence of a disconnect between the continent's youth bulge and democratic processes. As [Afrobarometer surveys](#) indicate, 'African youth are not fully engaged in formal political processes, such as voting in elections, as well as in more informal modes of engagement, such as meeting with community members and contacting political representatives'. While the general trend holds true, there is considerable variation among individual countries in the level of participation. However, even in countries where youth movements were vital to bringing about political change, such as Tunisia, there is insufficient political participation by young people. Poor quality of governance, corruption, lack of access to political processes and lack of inclusion of youth-related issues in party platforms can cause young people's disillusionment with politics. Young people often prioritise civic activism. Civic society activism [cannot however replace](#) political participation.

From 9 to 11 October 2017, members of youth organisations from Africa and Europe, including representatives of the African Diaspora, met in [Abidjan](#) at the fourth Africa-EU Youth summit, to set policy priorities to feed into the Africa-EU summit. The [declaration](#) adopted by the summit calls for citizenship and human rights education, for lowering the age of candidacy for public office to bring it into line with the voting age, and for the enhancement of participation of young people, including vulnerable ones, in society.

When political disaffection is compounded by economic hardship, there is a risk that some of the young could be captured by antidemocratic or radical political movements, and particularly by religious fundamentalists. It is considered that a generation of unemployed and marginalised young people can contribute to political instability, including terrorism.⁴ Africa's challenge is that the countries with the youngest populations are also the most fragile: prone to conflicts and internal divisions, with weak, ineffective and corrupt institutions, often landlocked, most often extremely poor and characterised by high competition over land and other resources. Of the 16 youngest African countries with a median age under 18 years, five (Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Somalia) are considered dangerously fragile (at alert level), while the others have a high level of fragility (deserving a warning level), according to the [Fund for Peace Fragile States Index](#). All – with one exception, Nigeria – [are least developed countries](#) and half are landlocked countries. Therefore it is crucial to strengthen the resilience of these states, in order to provide their young people with the peace, stability and good governance they need. To respond to this challenge the EU has outlined a developmental approach that focuses on the concept of resilience. According to the EU [joint communication](#), resilient societies presuppose accountable, democratic, effective and transparent institutions, and full respect of human rights. This also makes them best adapted to respond to challenges related to population growth. To secure peace and stability, the EU will continue its cooperation with, and vital support to, the African Union and the peace missions led by it.

The economic dimension

Africa's very young populations create an enormous opportunity for economic development, but the economy must be able to create enough jobs for the large cohorts of young people entering the labour market every year. One of the two major objectives outlined by the EU for future cooperation with Africa in its joint communication is 'Creating more and better jobs, especially for youth'. The need to focus on the private sector in order to generate jobs is clearly highlighted as well.

Economic growth and job creation

[African economies](#) had been growing quickly since the 2000s, reversing the stagnation trend that had set in in the 1980s, until commodity prices dropped in 2015. Economic growth rates had been impressive in many countries, but given the rapid demographic growth the increase in GDP per capita was slower and did not allow Africa to catch up with other parts of the world in terms of wealth. A characteristic feature of African economic development has been its reliance on commodity exports, which increases vulnerability to external shocks, such as the recent drop in prices of oil and other minerals. Africa continues to export unprocessed minerals (the extraction of which is not a very labour-intensive sector) and agricultural products. Another pillar that has supported growth has been the rise of the services sector, but this has been based mainly on low productivity informal jobs and is not internationally competitive. There is broad consensus that industrialisation, and particularly labour-intensive manufacturing sectors, have yet to take root on most of the African continent – something much needed to provide numerous jobs for young people. Recognising this reality, the joint communication pledges EU support to Africa's industrialisation through 'investments in value-adding and labour intensive sectors'.

As the continent is a net food importer, agricultural transformation could be crucial for relieving poverty and providing large numbers of jobs attractive to youth. Today, the young do not appear particularly interested in agriculture, as Africa's average age of farmer is about 60. [Agricultural transformation](#) has to be done in a way that preserves the [small-holder farms model](#) and thus jobs in rural areas, while introducing modern techniques. Otherwise, if traditional labour-intensive agriculture is replaced by large scale mechanised agriculture displacing small-holder farms, this transformation could worsen rural unemployment and set in motion major migration flows to already densely populated cities, where there are not enough decent job opportunities anyway. The employment potential of the agro-processing sector is recognised in the EU communication.

Investment is most needed in fragile states

The biggest challenge for the EU strategy of investing in Africa is to channel investments towards those countries with the youngest populations, which are also among the most fragile, conflict-prone countries, and therefore also the riskiest and the least attractive to foreign investment. It is the explicit purpose of the newly set up [EU External Investment Plan](#) (EIP) ([launched](#) in September 2017) to direct investments towards fragile regions, which usually only attract a small share of foreign direct investment. The Sustainable Development Fund with a total value of €4.1 billion will include a new guarantee and is expected to leverage €44 billion of investments in Africa and the EU Neighbourhood up to 2020. The plan aims to promote inclusive growth, job creation and sustainable development. It also sets up an EFSD guarantee, which will reduce the risk for private investors, by covering potential losses incurred by financing institutions and investors.

Exploiting the potential of new technologies

While investing in traditional, labour-intensive economic sectors, such as adding value to natural resources, including agricultural ones, is of vital importance for creating jobs, putting in place the conditions allowing Africa to benefit from new technologies, particularly in the digital and energy-production fields, is no less important. The '[mobile revolution](#)' on the continent has showcased the capacity to leapfrog stages of development and exploit the advantages of new technologies. African young people have seized on the potential of new technologies, and the emergence of an [IT ecosystem](#) in

several countries including entrepreneurs, tech ventures and innovation hubs is testament to this – a reality that has not been ignored by the [IT giants](#). One of the flagships of the EU joint communication is to support Africa's Digital Agenda, by exploiting the potential of digital technologies to promote agri-business and by developing an open digital research environment to foster skills and knowledge.

Investing in infrastructure, and particularly in energy production, is another important dimension of future EU-Africa cooperation, which will be supported by the EFSD, also in response to pledges entered into following the Paris Agreement on climate change. A new energy [paradigm](#) based on local production, which is made possible by the emergence of new renewable energy technologies, provides a unique opportunity for economic development, particularly in more remote and rural areas of Africa. Access to energy and transport infrastructure is vital for enterprises, and at the same time could make rural areas more attractive, to encourage young people to stay.

Africa's youth is inclined to entrepreneurship

In sub-Saharan Africa, many young people engage in early stage entrepreneurial activity, which may also be a consequence of the lack of formal jobs, as revealed by a [survey](#) of several African countries, compared to a number of other countries in the world. The selected sub-Saharan African countries, with the exception of South Africa, have among the highest rates of young people entrepreneurial activity in the world, with Nigeria ranking first. This area should therefore constitute a priority for action. One of the measures outlined in the joint communication is 'Supporting Africa's entrepreneurs, small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups through dedicated local business support structures and services'.

The fourth Africa-EU Youth Declaration also emphasises entrepreneurship: creating a conducive business environment, enhancing access to enterprise finance for young people, enhancing the capacity of young entrepreneurs to run an enterprise.

The social dimension

Health

Poverty can be particularly disempowering for young people in general, but its effects on health can be deep and irreversible. Poverty often leads to under-nutrition. According to [Unicef](#), under-nutrition puts children at greater risk of dying from common infections, and in the first 1 000 days of life leads to irreversible stunted growth, associated with impaired cognitive ability and reduced school and work performance. The percentage of children who are stunted has been declining only very slowly across the African continent from 38 % in 2000 to 31 % in 2016, according to [Unicef](#) (although rates of stunting are much lower in North Africa). Free, quality healthcare for children is not a reality in many African countries. The EU joint communication sets the objective of universal health coverage for young people, including vaccination, reproductive healthcare and prevention of communicable disease.

Education

Africa is behind the rest of the world in school attendance at all levels, with sub-Saharan Africa faring much worse. It has the highest rates of primary education exclusion in the world: according to [Unesco](#), 21.5 % of primary-school-age children were out of school in 2015 in the region. The situation has hugely improved: the rate of primary-school exclusion has almost halved since 1999, when it was 41.6 %, but given the rapid demographic growth, the numbers of children out of school remain persistently high. As

the region faces a rising demand for education due to population growth, urgent [action](#) is needed for progress to continue. In the same period, northern Africa has almost completely eradicated primary school exclusion: from a proportion of 18.3 % of primary-school-age children out of school in 1999 it reached 1.2 % in 2015.

According to Unesco data, enrolment in secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa is, at 42.4 %, well below the 76.4 % global average, whereas northern Africa is above this average, with 86.5 %. Technical and vocational education and training is not a priority in African secondary education. In 2012, technical and vocational programmes accounted for only [6 %](#) of total secondary enrolment in Africa.

Today, only around 8.5 % of young people in sub-Saharan Africa are enrolled in tertiary education, compared to over 35 % in North Africa and a similar global average. The proportion in sub-Saharan Africa has more than doubled compared to 1999, when it was around 4 %, however the ratio is skewed in favour of young men, with only 7 women enrolled in tertiary education for every 10 men. As the numbers of those attending university grows quickly, this overstretches the human and material resources of African universities.

The measures outlined by the EU in the joint communication include enhancing vocational training and education in agriculture and agri-food entrepreneurial activities, facilitating completion of primary and secondary education for all children, and encouraging African countries' participation in the Erasmus+ programme.

The fourth Africa-Europe Youth Summit Declaration recommends the recognition of skills gained through non-formal education, the mutual recognition of diplomas between Europe and Africa, and guaranteed universal access to quality education.

Reducing the gender gap

To provide young generations of African women with the opportunities they need, the gender gap has to be reduced. According to the UNDP's Africa Human Development [Report 2016](#), the gender gap costs the African continent around 6 % of its yearly GDP. Multiple barriers to women's empowerment persist. Of the [18](#) countries in the world where, by law, women need their husband's permission to work, eight are located in Africa. Approximately [39 %](#) of girls in sub-Saharan Africa are married before they turn 18. Empowering women to attend school, at least until the end of the secondary cycle, leads to a strong [reduction](#) in fertility rate and thus drives the demographic transition.

Outlook

Africa's young population could provide an enormous opportunity for economic development through the '[demographic dividend](#)', which is considered to have been one of the major drivers of the Asian economic miracle. It occurs however only if the demographic transition is properly managed, i.e. the economy supports the creation of enough jobs, and young people have the right skills needed on the labour market. According to an IMF [Working Paper](#), two other alternative scenarios are also possible for Africa: 'In the less benign case, the window of opportunity [represented by the demographic transition] passes by without any meaningful progress... In the worst case scenario, such a demographic transition could translate into an army of unemployed youth and significantly increase social risks and tensions.'

European Parliament position

The Parliament strongly supports EU cooperation and development policies for Africa. It has recently [adopted](#), as co-legislator, the [Regulation](#) on the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD). It [amended](#) the draft, introducing a provision requesting that the EFSD guarantee be applied preferentially to fragile countries (Article 8(2)4). According to another EP amendment, investments benefitting from the EFSD Guarantee shall respect the principles of development effectiveness and implement international standards, including the UN Principles for Responsible Investment, UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, International Labour Organization conventions, as well as international human rights law (Article 9(2)i).

The Parliament has just made its recommendations for the Africa-EU summit. Its Committee on Development adopted an own-initiative report on 10 October, '[EU-Africa strategy: a boost for development](#)' (Rapporteur: Maurice Ponga, EPP, France). It underlines the need to empower youth in the demographic context of the African continent, by promoting investment and creating sustainable jobs, by investing in the skills they need on the labour market, by integrating them into society to combat terrorism, by promoting their initiatives in the field of democracy, human rights and rule of law, and very importantly, by means of education and healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health and rights. The full Parliament [debated](#) this report during the first November plenary session.

Main references

European Commission, European External Action Service, [joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council for a renewed impetus of the Africa-EU Partnership](#), JOIN(2017) 17 final, May 2017.

Fourth Africa-Europe Youth Summit, [Abidjan Declaration](#), October 2017.

Endnotes

- ¹ The UN population data used in this briefing stem from the latest, June 2017 [UN World Population Prospects](#).
- ² On the controversial issue of how many people the Earth can sustain, see for example: [One Planet, How Many People? A Review of Earth's Carrying Capacity](#), UNEP, June 2012.
- ³ Estimates based on the medium variant scenario of the UN population prospects for age group 20 to 64.
- ⁴ According to a report from [Population Action International](#), [The Security demographic. Population and conflict after the Cold War](#), countries with a high number of young adults (at least 40 % of the adult population between the ages of 15 and 29) were 2.3 times more likely to suffer a civil conflict during the 1990s. Other studies endorse the conclusion that youth bulges, while not necessarily and directly leading to conflict, may in certain cases, when combined with poor governance and absence of economic growth, and other factors, increase the likelihood of civil conflict. For example, Henrik Urdal, 'The Demographics of Political Violence: Youth Bulges, Insecurity and Conflict', in *Too Poor for Peace? Global Poverty, Conflict and Security in the 21st Century*, 2007.

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