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Africa, rise up!: the 22nd century will be African

Introduction

After centuries on the periphery, Sub-Saharan Africa is set to play a much more significant role in the global economy and governance. Whilst Asia's economic and demographic boom may continue to dominate the first half of this century, the African continent's influence will grow in the second half, and the 22nd century may well become Africa's century.

Projections suggest that as early as the next decade, the proportion of the African population relative to the global population will exceed 20%, compared with 13% in 2000, or 9% in 1950. As the rest of the world ages, Africa is becoming a defining source of labour: more than half of the young people entering the global workforce in 2030 will be African¹.

Generally speaking, future demographic trends are uncertain. However, compared with other social, economic or political trends, the pace and direction of demographic change, at least in the short and medium term, are more predictable. Forecasts for African population growth may vary, but not substantially, because much of the growth is already due to what demographers call 'demographic momentum'; in other words, sub-Saharan Africa has so many women of childbearing age that even if a significant proportion decided to have fewer children, the population would continue to grow.

Although African states differ in terms of their geographical conditions and socio-political circumstances. Nevertheless, they face common socio-demographic challenges, with variations in the extent of these challenges and their capacity to overcome them. These challenges relate to high levels of youth unemployment, a high rate of informal employment, a low level of industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, the growing impact of climate change, food security issues, the fight against hunger, and inadequate education and healthcare systems².

However, although African states still have a long way to go in terms of socio-economic development metrics, the continent is at its best. Since 1960, average life expectancy has more than doubled, rising from 41 to 64 years. The proportion of children dying before the age of five has fallen by three-quarters. The proportion of young Africans attending

¹ THE ECONOMIST. 'The capitalist revolution Africa needs'. 9 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/01/09/the-capitalist-revolution-africa-needs>

² GRANADOS, Óscar. 'Africa and the demographic revolution', *Ethic*. 2024. Available at: <https://ethic.es/especiales-24/africa-y-la-revolucion-demografica/>

university has increased ninefold since 1970. African culture is gaining recognition worldwide. In the 2020s, African authors have won the Booker Prize, the Prix Goncourt and the Nobel Prize in Literature. All these advances bode well for the world's youngest continent³.

Africa's population boom

In 1885, when the colonial powers divided up Africa, the continent had fewer than 100 million inhabitants— that is, a third of the population of Europe. Today, there are almost two Africans for every European⁴. According to the latest edition of the United Nations' *World Population Prospects 2024*⁵, by the 22nd century, sub-Saharan Africa will be the most populous region in the world.

2024		2100	
World	8,161,972,573	World	10,180,160,752
East Asia	2,351,264,830	Sub-Saharan Africa	3,351,458,670
Central and South Asia	2,146,282,360	Central and South Asia	2,639,257,310
Sub-Saharan Africa	1,243,009,510	East Asia	1,448,796,860
Europe and North America	1,130,378,929	Europe and North America	1,067,216,669
Latin America and the Caribbean	663,466,070	North Africa and Western Asia	987,038,330
North Africa and Western Asia	581,482,160	Latin America and the Caribbean	613,447,220
Oceania	46,088,719	Oceania	72,945,698

Table 1. World population by international region in 2024 and projections for 2100.

Source: United Nations.

³ THE ECONOMIST. 'The economic gap between Africa and the rest of the world is growing'. 6 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2025/01/06/the-economic-gap-between-africa-and-the-rest-of-the-world-is-growing>

⁴ THE ECONOMIST. 'Africa is changing so rapidly it is becoming hard to ignore'. 26 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/03/26/africa-is-changing-so-rapidly-it-is-becoming-hard-to-ignore>

⁵ This is the twenty-eighth edition of the world population estimates and projections published by the United Nations since 1951. *World Population Prospects* is one of the most authoritative and comprehensive sets of demographic data for assessing population trends at global, regional and national levels. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

The World Population Prospects 2024 report notes that the number of countries worldwide where fertility has remained at very low levels for several decades –and where, as a result, the population has already peaked– has increased. In the 1980s, only 14 countries fell into this category, almost all of them in Europe. Today, the number stands at 63 and spans a wide geographical area, including countries in East Asia and Latin America, as well as, of course, Europe and North America. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, only Mauritius is in this group. Among the countries that have already reached their maximum population size are some of the world's most populous, such as China, Germany, Japan and *Russia*. Thus, China —currently the country with the world's second-largest population— is *foreseen* to experience the largest absolute population decline over the next thirty years (204 million), followed by Japan (21 million) and *Russia* (10 million). Furthermore, 24 of the countries in this group are currently experiencing what are termed 'ultra-low' fertility levels, with an average of fewer than 1.4 births per woman. These include, for example, China, Italy and Spain.

Another group of countries analysed in the aforementioned United Nations study comprises those whose populations will continue to grow over the next 30 years, reaching their peak by the middle of the century. This list of 48 countries includes some of the world's most populous nations today, such as Iran, Brazil and Turkey. This group also includes three countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Réunion, the Seychelles and Cape Verde.

Finally, *World Population Prospects 2024* analyses the group of countries whose population is projected to peak by the end of the 21st century or even later, and this includes all the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, with the exception of the island states mentioned above. The United Nations study therefore foresees that, over the next 30 years, the population of sub-Saharan African countries will increase by 79%, meaning that by 2054 sub-Saharan Africa will have a population of between 2,100 and 2,400 million, and between 3,000 and 4,000 million by 2100. According to these same figures, five countries in sub-Saharan Africa —Angola, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Niger and Somalia— will experience exponential growth, with their populations more than doubling in size over the next three decades.

As a result of this population explosion, the *ranking* of the world's most populous countries at the start of the 22nd century will ⁶ include four African states in the top positions.

	2024	Projection 2054	Projection 2100
1	India (1,451)	India (1692)	India (1505)
2	China (1419)	China (1215)	China (633)
3	United States (345)	Pakistan (389)	Pakistan (511)
4	Indonesia (283)	United States (384)	Nigeria (477)
5	Pakistan (251)	Nigeria (376)	Democratic Republic of the Congo (431)
6	Nigeria (233)	Indonesia (322)	United States (421)
7	Brazil (212)	Ethiopia (240)	Ethiopia (367)
8	Bangladesh (174)	Democratic Republic of the Congo (238)	Indonesia (296)
9	Russia (145)	Bangladesh (219)	Tanzania (263)
10	Ethiopia (132)	Brazil (215)	Bangladesh (209)

Table 2. Ranking of the ten most populous countries in the world. Figures in millions.
Source: United Nations.

⁶ DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS. *World Population Prospects 2022*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

High fertility rates, but on the decline

In terms of fertility, the current global rate is 2.25 live births per woman, compared with 3.31 births in 1990 and more than 5 in 1950. More than half of the world's countries have a fertility rate below the replacement level of 2.1 live births per woman. This is the level required for a population to keep a constant size in the long term (excluding migration), with each generation followed by another approximately the same size⁷.

In Asia and Latin America, the total fertility rate has fallen from around 6 in 1950 to almost the replacement level. In sub-Saharan Africa, the decline in fertility has been later and slower: from 6.5 in 1950 to 4.6 in 2020⁸. As things stand, the countries with the highest fertility rates are currently found in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically Chad, Niger, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia⁹.

The number of countries with fertility rates above the replacement level will stand at 49 in 2050 and just six in 2100, three of which are in Africa: Samoa, Somalia, Tonga, Niger, Chad and Tajikistan¹⁰.

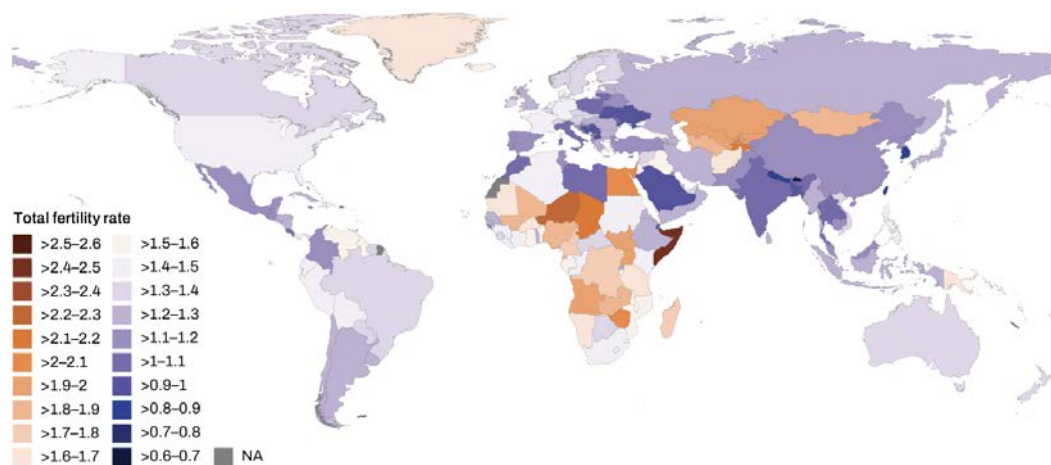


Figure 1. Projected fertility rates by country in 2100. Source: The Lancet

It is worth noting that the population projections published by the United Nations in recent years contain lower estimates than those considered a decade ago. In this regard, the

⁷ DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS. *World Population Prospects 2024*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

⁸ LAM, David, LEIBBRANDT, Murray and ALLEN, James. *The Demography of the Labour Force in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and Opportunities*. GLM, November 2019. Available at: https://g2lm-lic.iza.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/glmlic_sp010.pdf

⁹ DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS. *World Population Prospects 2024*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

¹⁰ 'Global fertility in 204 countries and territories, 1950–2021, with forecasts to 2100: a comprehensive demographic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021', *The Lancet*. 18 May 2024. Available at: <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2824%2900550-6>

world's population in 2100 is now forecast to be 6 per cent smaller —or some 700 million people fewer— than predicted a decade ago, partly due to a slightly faster-than-expected decline in fertility in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa¹¹.

Compared with other regions, the fertility rate in sub-Saharan African countries is generally high, and although there is still considerable scope for population growth, the data suggest that a significant slowdown in birth rates is already taking place. In this regard, a number of countries in the southern and eastern regions stand out, where the fertility rate in 2024 was approximately three, or even below three: South Africa (2.2), Botswana (2.3), Namibia (2.8), Kenya (3.1), Rwanda (3.1) and Malawi (3.1)¹².

Furthermore, across almost the entire continent, fertility rates are lower for urban women, who tend to have between 30% and 40% fewer children than their rural counterparts. The shift away from agriculture towards urbanised economic activities, in which intellectual ability is often more valuable than physical strength, reduces the economic advantage of having many children.

If we consider the case of Kenya, its fertility rate has fallen from 6.7 children per woman in 1989 to 3.1 in 2024. Furthermore, it also illustrates what has already been noted: the marked difference between urban and rural areas. On average, urban Kenyan women have 2.8 children each, one fewer than the 3.9 had by rural women¹³.

Delaying the age at which women have their first child can make a significant contribution to curbing population growth. According to United Nations statistics, if African girls did not have children before the age of 18, the projected population size of sub-Saharan African countries would be 85 million lower in 2054 and 292 million lower in 2100¹⁴.

Furthermore, there is a pattern that is replicated in sub-Saharan Africa and in every region where it has been analysed: the close relationship between education and fertility rates. Thus, African women without formal education have, on average, six or more children. This figure falls to around four for women who have completed primary education and to

¹¹ DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS. *World Population Prospects 2024*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

¹² THE WORLD FACTBOOK. *Total fertility rate*. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/total-fertility-rate/country-comparison/>

¹³ THE ECONOMIST. 'Kenya's population growth is slowing in cities and towns'. 5 April 2023. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/04/05/kenyas-population-growth-is-slowing-in-cities-and-towns>

¹⁴ DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS. *World Population Prospects 2024*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

around two for those who have completed secondary education¹⁵. More education means marrying later, having fewer children and delaying the age at which women become mothers. Furthermore, with higher levels of education, women are more likely to pursue a professional career¹⁶.



Image 2. Girls and boys at an African school. Source: *The Economist*

Reasons for contextualising demographic behaviour

However, whilst it is true that there has been a slowdown in birth rates and a general improvement in income, health and education levels, why has the decline in fertility rates in sub-Saharan African countries not been as rapid or as pronounced as it has generally been in the rest of the world? This question has led some scholars to seek explanations both socio-demographic and cultural.

Thus, according to Chukwuma Chinye of the Centre for Democracy and Development in Nigeria, the prevailing narratives on the continent's demographic trends are negative and come mainly from a Eurocentric perspective that focuses on the fact that fertility rates in Africa are not falling fast enough compared with demographic models in South-East Asia. A common misconception amongst those responsible for analysing and proposing public

¹⁵ THE ECONOMIST. 'Africa's population will double by 2050', 26 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/03/26/africas-population-will-double-by-2050>

¹⁶ AHN, Ashley. 'Demography Is Destiny in Africa', *Foreign Policy*. 26 August 2023. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/26/demographics-africa-sub-sahara-population-boom-growth-aging-gender-inequality-climate-change/>

policies is the desire to transfer policies that have been tried and tested in other regions to the diverse demographic contexts of Africa. This approach overlooks socio-cultural differences. Predicting Africa's demographic trajectory on the assumption that it will follow the same pattern as other regions of the world is a misconception.

According to Chinye, at the root of this misconception lies the use of fertility rates as virtually the only standard to measure demographic transition, without first assessing the significant role played by infant mortality figures in the African context. Therefore, a key reason why fertility rates in Africa do not match Western estimates is that infant mortality on the African continent remains high compared with other regions. There is an intrinsic link between fertility rates and infant mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa; they go hand in hand. The real problem does not lie in fertility rates being disproportionately high, but rather in the fact that families are choosing to have more children to balance out equal infant mortality rates. In wealthy countries, it is rare for children to die. In developing countries, this unfortunately continues to happen. As a country's socio-economic and health conditions improve, families can expect more children to survive to adulthood, so they do not need to have as many children. In general, infant mortality is a good indicator of these trends. On this basis, African fertility is essentially what one would expect based on the continent's current infant mortality rates¹⁷.

Republic of the Niger is a prime example: this country has the highest fertility rate in the world, as well as very high rates of poverty and mortality. Women there have an average of 6.7 children, but only 2.7 of these sons will still be alive as adults by the time their parents are no longer of working age. Furthermore, parents rely most on their sons to provide material and financial support.

The extended family plays a more significant role in African life than elsewhere; children may be raised by cousins or aunts. This reduces the burden of child-rearing on parents and lowers the implicit cost of having children. Furthermore, many African cultures have communal social structures whereby the cost of having more children falls on the community rather than on the family. In this regard, where communal land tenure predominates, having a large family is economically advantageous, as resources are distributed according to family size.

¹⁷ STONE, Lyman. 'African Fertility is Right Where It Should Be', *Institute for Family Studies*. 29 October 2018. Available at: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/african-fertility-is-right-where-it-should-be>

Another explanation is the relatively low use of modern contraceptives, which is partly due to a reluctance to accept family planning assistance because of mistrust of practices imported from Western countries¹⁸. This is compounded by the fact that, in African cultures, marriage and childbearing continue to be valued as desirable choices in people's lives¹⁹.

Gountiéni D. Lankoandé, director of the Groupe de Recherche et d'Analyse Appliquées pour le Développement in Burkina Faso, when asked for this analysis what he believed to be the reasons for the high fertility rates in sub-Saharan African countries, considered that there are different reasons to explain this: "In rural areas, which typically account for 60% of the population in most countries on the continent, women and children constitute a significant part of the workforce in agricultural production. Having many children also remains a sign of prestige in many countries. Religion also plays an important role. In the most widespread cultures, traditions and religions in sub-Saharan Africa (Islam, Christianity, etc.), a child is a gift from God. Changes are taking place in urban areas, but in most cases, attitudes have not changed."

Towards the desired demographic dividend

According to the report published in January 2025 by the African Development Bank on the continent's macroeconomic performance and outlook, real GDP growth in Africa is set to accelerate to 4.1% in 2025 and 4.4% in 2026. In 2024, it stood at 3.2%, slightly higher than the 3.0% recorded in 2023. With these figures, the African continent is consolidating its position as the world's second-fastest-growing region after Asia. However, despite this positive trend, the report highlights that Africa's growth remains below the 7% threshold required for a substantial reduction in poverty²⁰.

¹⁸ AHN, Ashley. 'Demography Is Destiny in Africa', *Foreign Policy*. 26 August 2023. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/26/demographics-africa-sub-sahara-population-boom-growth-aging-gender-inequality-climate-change/>

¹⁹ LE MAG. 'Unique Features, Challenges and Opportunities of Sub-Saharan Demography', 27 July 2024. Available at: <https://lemag.ird.fr/fr/singularites-defis-et-opportunites-de-la-demographie-subsaharienne>

²⁰ AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK GROUP. *Africa's Macroeconomic Performance and Outlook 2025*. Available at: <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/africas-macroeconomic-performance-and-outlook-january-2025>

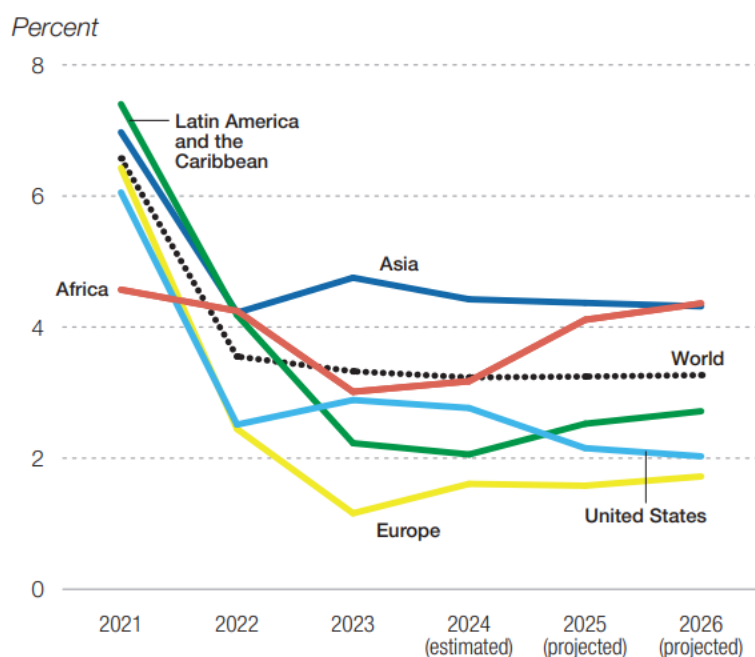


Figure 3. Percentage GDP growth by international region. Source: African Development Bank Group statistics.

According to projections by the International Monetary Fund, in 2025 twelve of the 20 fastest-growing economies in the world were African.

GDP growth	
South Sudan	27.2%
Guyana	14.4%
Libya	13.7%
Senegal	9.3%
Palau	8.5%
Sudan	8.3%
Uganda	7.5%
Niger	7.3%
Macau	7.3%
Bhutan	7.2%
Mongolia	7%
Zambia	6.6%
Benin	6.5%
Ethiopia	6.5%

Rwanda	6.5%
India	6.5%
Ivory Coast	6.4%
Philippines	6.1%
Vietnam	6.1%
Djibouti	6%
World average	3.2%

Table 3. The twenty fastest-growing economies in 2025. Source: International Monetary Fund

If GDP growth keeps pace with population growth, economies such as Nigeria's could surpass European powers in size (adjusted for purchasing power). According to a report by PwC, which foresees that Nigeria's GDP will reach 6.4 trillion dollars by 2050, the country would overtake Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Saudi Arabia in the global rankings²¹.

Population growth in the 20th century was concentrated in Asia, whilst that of the 21st century is centred on sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the increase in the working-age population between 1960 and 2020 occurred in Asia, whilst the African continent will account for the majority of the working-age population between 2020 and 2100²².

Whilst much of the world is ageing, Africa is becoming a crucial source of labour. Thus, more than half of the young people joining the global labour force in 2030 will be African²³. This trend represents perhaps the region's greatest opportunity: a large pool of human talent, a vast market and significant reserves of natural resources. However, the economic dynamism that may accompany the continent's current circumstances will not automatically become a reality; sound policy decisions will be required to ensure that this potential is realised²⁴.

²¹ PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS. *Nigeria: Looking beyond Oil*. Available at: <https://www.pwc.com/ng/en/assets/pdf/nigeria-looking-beyond-oil-report.pdf>

²² LAM, David, LEIBBRANDT, Murray and ALLEN, James. *The Demography of the Labour Force in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and Opportunities*. GLM, November 2019. Available at: https://q2lm-lic.iza.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/glmlic_sp010.pdf

²³ THE ECONOMIST. 'The capitalist revolution Africa needs'. 9 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/01/09/the-capitalist-revolution-africa-needs>

²⁴ SELASSIE, A. *The African Century*. Finance & Development, 2021. Available at: <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/022/0058/004/article-A017-en.xml>

Sub-Saharan Africa can capitalise on what demographers call the demographic dividend—the economic benefit countries obtain when the proportion of the working-age population increases relative to that of children and the elderly. In many countries across the African continent, the proportion of the working-age population (between 20 and 64 years of age) will continue to grow faster than the total population, offering an opportunity to realise this dividend and accelerate economic growth²⁵.

Gountiéni D. Lankoandé considers that “population growth should be an opportunity and a driver of socio-economic progress in sub-Saharan African countries given the young profile of their population, which is synonymous with dynamism, innovation, strength and good health. However, from an economic perspective, per capita wealth creation remains low, and a large proportion of the population continues to live below the poverty line compared with other regions. Furthermore, rapid urbanisation is exacerbating pressures on cities in terms of access to natural resources, public services, housing and infrastructure, whilst in rural areas, increased competition for water and forest resources is creating tensions between farmers and herders. However, despite all these challenges, we are convinced that these trends can be managed and integrated for the benefit of the economy, society and culture by innovating on the basis of knowledge and strengthening existing demographic policies.”

To the extent that African societies invest in improving educational standards, the continent can develop an unprecedented pool of talent. Better-quality education for millions of Africans can lead to significant progress for society as a whole.

If we take the experience of East Asia as an example, the data suggest that near-universal enrolment in secondary education and the high quality of educational provision were key factors in these countries’ success. If we look at the case of South Korea, studies highlight the close link that has existed between investment in education and socio-economic development. The findings show that if educational standards had not improved during the country’s remarkable period of growth, GDP per capita would be only 30 per cent of its current value. More generally, the effects that demographic change and education have had on growth are closely intertwined: a favourable demographic profile,

²⁵ DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS. *World Population Prospects 2024*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

in the form of a higher proportion of the population of working age, tends to boost growth, but the extent of this benefit depends above all on the level of education²⁶.

However, education statistics show that the continent still lags behind figures recorded in other developing regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, nearly three in every 10 school-age children do not attend school. The completion rate for primary education stands at around 65%, compared with a global average of 87%. And the literacy rate among 15- to 24-year-olds is only 75%, below the rate of nearly 90% in other developing economies. One of the reasons for these shortfalls is that public spending on education in many sub-Saharan African countries is below the desirable average. The average education budget in the region stood at approximately 3.5% of GDP in 2020, below the international recommendation of at least 4%²⁷.

Africa can improve the productivity and quality of its economic growth by investing in a virtuous cycle of better skills leading to better jobs. Labour markets must rapidly increase the supply and demand for skilled workers. On the supply side, whilst educational attainment has improved, the quality of education must be brought up to the level of other developing regions. On the demand side, labour markets must create quality jobs for skilled workers. More than 80% of educated young Africans aspire to work in highly skilled occupations, but only 8% find such employment. Demand for skilled workers remains low because employment growth has been confined to low-productivity sectors such as agriculture, retail and services²⁸. However, over the last decade there has been exponential growth in the number of African start-ups, which is proving to be an opportunity to attract investment and business²⁹.

Spending on education delivers clear long-term economic benefits that absolutely justify its cost. Increased public spending on education yields economic benefits such as higher productivity and greater foreign direct investment. Furthermore, it will ensure the supply

²⁶ INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND. 'Building Tomorrow's Workforce: Education, Opportunity, and Africa's Demographic Dividend'. April 2024. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/SSA/Issues/2024/04/19/regional-economic-outlook-for-sub-saharan-africa-april-2024>

²⁷ FORNINO, Michele and TIFFIN, Andrew. 'Sub-Saharan Africa's Growth Requires Quality Education for a Growing Population', *International Monetary Fund*. 25 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2024/04/25/sub-saharan-africas-growth-requires-quality-education-for-growing-population>

²⁸ *Africa's Development Dynamics 2024*. OECD, 5 July 2024. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/africa-s-development-dynamics-2024_df06c7a4-en.html

²⁹ CHINYE, Chukwuma. 'Myths, future prospects and debates on demographic challenges in Africa', *Ideas*. 28 January 2022. Available at: <https://revistaidees.cat/es/mitos-perspectivas-de-futuro-y-debates-sobre-los-retos-demograficos-en-africa/>

of a productive workforce, which a rapidly ageing world will need with ever-greater urgency.

One obstacle to progress in terms of welfare is that 85.8% of the working population in sub-Saharan Africa is employed in the informal sector; in other words, they are engaged in work that is neither registered nor recognised and therefore makes no contribution to social security. People do not pay tax on their income, which means that countries have less scope to invest in social welfare. Furthermore, informal production accounts for 62% of official GDP on average across the continent³⁰. Addressing the issue of labour and economic informality is essential for the realisation of the desired demographic dividend.

A key opportunity for socio-economic development will be linked to the effective operation and use of the recently established African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the world's largest free trade agreement in terms of membership (signed by 54 countries), territory and population (a market of nearly 1.3 billion people). The aim is to boost economic growth, intra-African trade and investment across the continent. Although it was established in February 2020, implementation of the agreement has been slow. Thus, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, African countries continue to trade more with the rest of the world than with one another. The reasons usually cited are inadequate infrastructure, a lack of funding and poor governance³¹.

Statistics show that Africa exports more to the rest of the world than to other African countries. The proportion of Africa's exports to the rest of the world ranged between 80% and 90% between 2000 and 2020, consisting mainly of primary products and minerals. Intra-African trade accounted for only 15.2% of Africa's total trade volume during the 2015–2020 period, well below desirable levels. The AfCFTA is expected to change these figures³².

³⁰ *Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024). Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-second-edition>

³¹ LEWIS, Neil. 'Intra-African trade could double in the next five years, says Secretary-General of the African Continental Free Trade Area', *CNN*. 7 October 2024. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/07/africa/afcfta-secretary-general-mene-interview-spc/>

³² *Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024). Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-second-edition>

Industrialisation and the energy transition: an opportunity for development

One of the main challenges facing African economies is industrial development. To give an example, two out of every three cocoa beans in the world come from Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, but their farmers receive only 5% of the profits from the chocolate industry due to a lack of industrial development. Cocoa leaves Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire at a very low price, and if they wish to purchase it in processed form, they end up buying it on the international market at a higher price, paying a great deal of money for a product that was originally theirs. Something similar, on a large scale, occurs with oil, which is exported as crude and imported in refined form³³.

The global drive to mitigate climate change is generating significant demand for critical minerals, which are vital for transforming the energy system and developing low-emission technologies. Electric vehicles and renewable energy generation are an integral part of this transition, requiring more minerals than traditional fossil fuel technologies. For example, the production of batteries for electric vehicles relies heavily on minerals such as lithium, nickel, manganese, and cobalt. Renewable technologies, such as solar panels and wind turbines, require minerals such as bauxite, copper, silicon and platinum group metals, amongst others. As such, demand for these critical minerals –which has already risen in recent years– is forecast to soar in the coming decades.

Sub-Saharan Africa, where it is estimated that around 30% of the world's proven reserves of critical minerals are located, is crucial to global supply. The region already contributes significantly to the production of minerals such as cobalt, graphite, manganese, platinum group metals, and chromium. The Democratic Republic of the Congo dominates the cobalt market, accounting for over 70% of global production and approximately 50% of the world's proven reserves. The main producers of manganese include South Africa, Gabon and Ghana, with over 60% of global production. Other countries such as Guinea (bauxite), Mozambique (graphite), Mali (lithium), Zambia (copper) and Zimbabwe (nickel, platinum, lithium) are poised to benefit from this boom, driven by the transition to clean energy³⁴.

³³ SOLER, Davis. 'Youth: a divine treasure? Five challenges of the African demographic dividend', *Africa Mundi*. 27 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.africamundi.es/p/juventud-divino-tesoro-cinco-retos-del-dividendo-demografico-africano>

³⁴ INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND. 'Digging for Opportunity: Harnessing Sub-Saharan Africa's Wealth in Critical Minerals'. April 2024. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/SSA/Issues/2024/04/19/regional-economic-outlook-for-sub-saharan-africa-april-2024>

However, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa export critical minerals mainly in their raw form, which typically have lower added value than processing activities. Although countries in the region have deepened their involvement in the trade of minerals and are working to integrate themselves further into global value chains, they continue to focus primarily on basic extraction.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, which accounts for 74% of global cobalt mining, sends 97% of its cobalt exports –mostly unprocessed– to China. Similarly, it is estimated that large quantities of low-grade lithium in rock form are shipped from mines in Zimbabwe –also to China– rather than being processed locally³⁵.

By limiting themselves to the stages of extraction with the lowest added value, countries risk losing significant revenue. The development of local processing industries could substantially increase profits, boost tax revenue, and create more skilled jobs. Sub-Saharan Africa's wealth of critical minerals offers an opportunity to move away from the export of raw materials towards the development of processing industries to generate greater added value.

African demography and migration: a continent on the move

The contribution of international migration to demographic change varies across countries and international regions. In most countries where the average fertility rate is relatively high, migration is likely to have a limited impact on population growth. Conversely, for many of the countries with relatively low fertility rates, migration is projected to be the main driver of future population growth³⁶.

In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, mobility takes various forms: herders who traverse the continent daily in search of pasture for their livestock and trading opportunities, the dynamic trade routes that have survived centuries of change and continue to this day, people who move in search of education and work or fleeing conflict or the adverse effects of climate change. It is estimated that in 2020 there were 25.1 million international migrants in Africa, meaning that 1.9% of the African population lived outside the country

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS. *World Population Prospects 2024*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

in which they were born, below the global average of 3.6%. This figure represented 9% of the 281 million international migrants worldwide in 2020³⁷.

One of the key characteristics of African migration is that more than half of African international migrants move primarily within the continent. More specifically, the number of intra-African international migrants —those whose countries of origin and destination were both in Africa— stood at 20.8 million in 2020, slightly higher than the number of African migrants moving to non-African countries, which was 19.7 million. In relative terms, intra-African migration accounted for 51% of total African migration. This pattern is common across all regions except North Africa, where migration to European countries (as in the case of Algeria, Morocco or Tunisia) or to the Middle East (as in the case of Egypt) significantly outnumbers intra-African migration³⁸. For example, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia account for 5 million of the estimated 11 million African migrants residing in Europe³⁹.

The largest flows of intra-African migration occur predominantly between countries that share a land border, highlighting how migration on the continent is characterised by short-distance mobility and is therefore more local than global. Furthermore, the bidirectional nature of several intra-African corridors reflects the high prevalence of temporary or circular labour migration —such as between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire— and of refugee movements, such as between South Sudan and Sudan. These data also support the hypothesis that return migration is an important dimension of mobility in Africa⁴⁰.

³⁷ *Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024): Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-second-edition>

³⁸ *Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024): Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-second-edition>

³⁹ FUNDACIÓN ALTERNATIVAS. *Africa Report 2024: The European Migration and Asylum Pact*. 2024. Available at: https://fundacionalternativas.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/DIGITAL_Informe_Africa_2024_V5.pdf

⁴⁰ *Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024): Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-second-edition>



Intra-Africa corridors

Burkina Faso	>	1 376 350	>	Côte d'Ivoire
South Sudan	>	1 022 433	>	Uganda
South Sudan	>	867 593	>	Sudan (the)
Zimbabwe	>	690 243	>	South Africa
Sudan (the)	>	587 668	>	South Africa
Côte d'Ivoire	>	562 117	>	Burkina Faso
Mali	>	522 146	>	Côte d'Ivoire
Somalia	>	425 284	>	Kenya
Somalia	>	411 152	>	Ethiopia
South Sudan	>	409 890	>	Ethiopia
Democratic Republic of the Congo (the)	>	397 638	>	Uganda
Benin	>	377 169	>	Nigeria
Sudan (the)	>	372 594	>	Chad
Mozambique	>	350 463	>	South Africa
Central African Republic	>	323 269	>	Democratic Republic of the Congo (the)
Central African Republic	>	303 005	>	Cameroon
Uganda	>	290 597	>	Kenya
Rwanda	>	251 333	>	Democratic Republic of the Congo (the)

Figure 4. Main intra-African migration corridors. Source: *Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024)*. IOM, UN Migration.

Refugees and asylum-seekers account for a high proportion of all international migrants in Africa, at 21% in 2020. In Africa, as in the rest of the world, most refugees remain close to their countries of origin⁴¹. Of the total number of refugees under UNHCR's mandate at the end of 2022, more than 87% came from ten countries: Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Somalia, the Central African Republic and Eritrea. As such, this list includes six African countries⁴².

In recent years, the term 'climate refugees' has been coined. The number of people forced to leave their homes due to natural disasters, droughts and other calamities has risen. Although the figures are difficult to calculate because this category of migration is still being defined by governments and international law, the World Bank estimates that the number of climate refugees in sub-Saharan Africa could exceed 85 million by 2050. For example, Lake Chad, which sustains nearly 25 million people across four different countries, has shrunk dramatically over the last 60 years, increasingly displacing many of those who depend on its waters⁴³.

⁴¹ *Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024): Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-second-edition>

⁴² *World Migration Report 2024*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>

⁴³ ESIRI, George. 'People and Society: Sub-Saharan Africa', *Council on Foreign Relations*. 8 February 2022. Available at: <https://education.cfr.org/learn/learning-journey/sub-saharan-africa-essentials/people-and-society-sub-saharan-africa>

However, the available data suggest that climate change cannot be considered the main driver of migration and food security, but is rather one factor amongst other traditional factors such as the consequences of weak governance in many African states, global food production structures and other social factors⁴⁴.

Labour migration flows, both regular and irregular, are fundamental to the pattern of mobility on the African continent. In 2020, there were more than 14.5 million migrant workers in sub-Saharan Africa, residing mainly in South Africa (19%), Côte d'Ivoire (12%), Uganda (7% and Ethiopia (5%)⁴⁵.

All these figures contradict common perceptions of African migration, which is mistakenly believed to be higher than ever and directed primarily towards wealthy European countries⁴⁶.

According to Hein de Haas, Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam and founder and co-director of the International Institute for Migration at the University of Oxford, it is not true that migration is higher today than ever before. Haas argues that “the figures have little to do with a mass influx of illegal immigrants, but rather with the growing movement of migrant workers drawn by the ever-increasing labour shortages in the wealthy, ageing societies of the West”. Haas also argues that it is a mistake to overestimate the scale of illegal migration: “My estimates suggest that nine out of ten Africans who move to Europe do so legally, with a passport and visa in hand. But because political rhetoric and media images focus on illegal migration, we tend to exaggerate the numerical significance of this type of migration. The vast majority of immigrants, including those heading for Spain, cross borders legally. What is happening at the Spanish border is a genuine humanitarian crisis that must be addressed, but we must be careful and, based on the data, not accept the idea that the borders are completely out of control. It is important to continue to keep things in perspective. In other words: there are grounds for concern, but not for panic”⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ *World Migration Report 2024*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>

⁴⁵ *Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024): Connecting the threads: Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-second-edition>

⁴⁶ THE ECONOMIST. 'The world's peak population may be smaller than expected'. 5 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/04/05/the-worlds-peak-population-may-be-smaller-than-expected>

⁴⁷ EL CONFIDENCIAL. Interview with Hein de Haas. 1 August 2024. Available at: https://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/2024-08-01/entrevista-hein-haas-migracion_3931908/

In any case, irregular migration is not only a humanitarian challenge but also a governance challenge for European countries. In 2022, more than 189,000 irregular arrivals in Europe were recorded, both by land and by sea –the highest figure since 2016. The largest numbers of irregular migrants in 2022 came from Egypt (21,800), Syria (over 18,000), Tunisia (around 18,000) and Afghanistan (over 18,000)⁴⁸.

If we look at the ranking of the top twenty countries of origin for international migrants, there are no countries from sub-Saharan Africa on the list. However, the 20th position is held by a country from the north of the continent: Egypt.

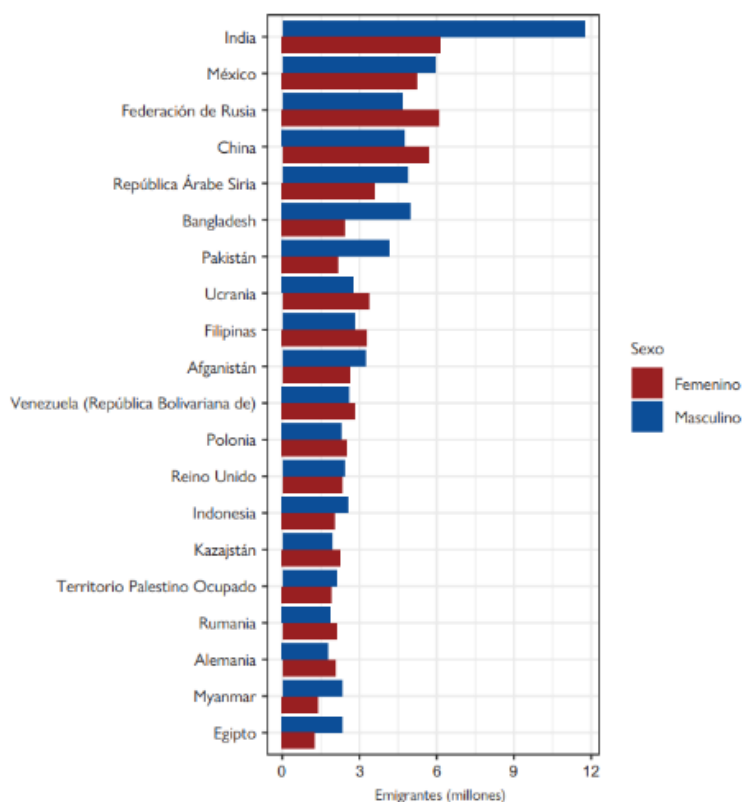


Figure 5. Top twenty countries of origin for international migrants.
Source: *World Migration Report 2024*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024.

According to Eurostat data, the population of European Union countries will fall by 6% by 2100. The European population is expected to peak in 2026, at a total of 453 million people, before declining to the projected 420 million by the turn of the century. The European Commission estimates that whilst 70% of the population is currently of working

⁴⁸ *World Migration Report 2024*. IOM, UN Migration, 2024. Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>

age, by 2070 that figure will fall to 54%, which will inevitably transform the social security and pension systems of European countries⁴⁹.

And although it is not significant from a demographic point of view, in France there has been talk of the 'silent exodus', a term used to describe the growing number of French people of African origin who are leaving the country due to racism and discrimination and migrating to African countries⁵⁰.

Migration plays a fundamental role in the development of countries of origin. This is because migrants continue to maintain close ties with their families and communities and make a significant contribution to their development. The main contribution of migrants takes the form of remittances, but also the exchange of knowledge and ideas between host countries and countries of origin.

The easiest benefits to measure are the remittances that migrants send home. Nigeria, for example, received \$24.3 billion in 2018 from its citizens working abroad– some eight times more than it receives in development aid. It is also more than ten times the amount of foreign investment Nigeria received that same year. Senegalese people working abroad send back up to half of their earnings, meaning that remittances account for around 9% of the country's national income. These flows are not only much larger than foreign aid, but are often better utilised, as most of the money sent by migrants has a direct impact on improving the social welfare of the recipient family⁵¹.

Finally, it should be noted that as its population grows, Africa is also becoming more urbanised. In 1950, the proportion of the population living in urban areas was estimated at 11%; by 2020, this had risen to 41%; and, according to United Nations projections, it is expected to reach 58% by 2050. Urbanisation occurs through two channels: migration from the countryside to the city and natural population growth within urban centres. In Asia and Latin America, most of the population is already urban, and all future population growth will take place in these areas. However, approximately 59% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa is currently rural. As in the rest of the world, the greatest demand for

⁴⁹ ZORNOZA, María. 'Europe and immigration: between rejection and necessity'. 6 December 2023. Available at: https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2023-12-06/europa-y-la-inmigracion-entre-el-rechazo-y-la-necesidad_3788097/

⁵⁰ ABIDA, Nour, JIMÉNEZ, Nathalie and BEMBRIDGE, Courtney. 'The silent exodus: young French people returning to their parents' countries in Africa', *BBC Africa*. 30 October 2024. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c4gzpp0z7mdo>

⁵¹ THE ECONOMIST. 'Migration is helping Africa in many ways'. 26 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/03/26/migration-is-helping-africa-in-many-ways>

employment in Africa is in urban areas. But, unlike the rest of the world, the African continent continues to have a large and growing rural population that must continue to be taken into account⁵².



Image 8. Author: IMF/Esther Ruth Mbabazi

Rural-to-urban migration across the continent has brought a degree of economic prosperity to many Africans who are leaving agriculture behind to seek formal, more stable and better-paid jobs in the cities. However, not everyone seeking such jobs has found them, and many African cities are overcrowded, whilst the cost of living has risen⁵³.

Demographics and climate change

Climate change is perhaps one of the most significant challenges facing Africa's population boom. The most vulnerable societies are more exposed to the socio-economic consequences arising from natural disasters such as floods, displacement or

⁵² LAM, David, LEIBBRANDT, Murray and ALLEN, James. *The Demography of the Labour Force in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and Opportunities*. GLM, November 2019. Available at: https://q2lm-lic.iza.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/glmlic_sp010.pdf

⁵³ ESIRI, George. 'People and Society: Sub-Saharan Africa', *Council on Foreign Relations*. 8 February 2022. Available at: <https://education.cfr.org/learn/learning-journey/sub-saharan-africa-essentials/people-and-society-sub-saharan-africa>

environmental degradation. Consequently, climate change poses a major threat to a population characterised by high levels of poverty and constant population growth⁵⁴.

Although global warming is a problem affecting everyone on the planet, there is a paradox in the fact that the continent that produces the fewest greenhouse gas emissions may be one of the hardest hit by them.

One of the most pressing considerations for African countries is how to minimise future environmental impacts whilst, at the same time, meeting the needs of their growing populations. Some environmental damage often stems from processes of economic development that lead to higher standards of living. Furthermore, population growth amplifies these environmental pressures by increasing overall economic demand. Many of the countries with rapidly growing populations are currently considered to be low-income. These countries, which until now have been responsible for only a small proportion of global consumption of material resources and greenhouse gas emissions, are expected to increase their energy consumption as part of their economic development⁵⁵.

There is also the paradox that, precisely at a time when there is a consensus on implementing measures to curb global warming, new oil and gas fields have begun to be discovered over the last decade in various parts of Africa, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Namibia, Mozambique, Senegal and Ethiopia. Faced with this new and advantageous situation, it seems logical that African governments and peoples should refuse to forgo the exploitation of these new resources in order to prevent an increase in global warming. Africa is responsible for only 4% of global carbon emissions, despite being home to around 20% of the world's population. To put this dilemma into context, it is also worth noting that, for example, Nigeria –the African continent's leading oil exporter– has failed to transform its oil revenues into significant economic and social prosperity for the Nigerian people as a whole. Among the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, only Gabon has so far managed to translate oil revenues into social prosperity, thereby joining the group of upper-middle-income countries⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ CHINYE, Chukwuma. 'Myths, future prospects and debates on demographic challenges in Africa'. *Idees*. 28 January 2022. Available at: <https://revistaidees.cat/es/mitos-perspectivas-de-futuro-y-debates-sobre-los-retos-demograficos-en-africa/>

⁵⁵ DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, UNITED NATIONS. *World Population Prospects 2024*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024>

⁵⁶ FRENCH, Howard. 'The Empty Promise of Africa's Oil and Gas Boom', *Foreign Policy*. 26 June 2024. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/06/26/africa-oil-gas-discoveries-economic-development-climate-energy/>

The scale of the problem of global warming for the African continent is further highlighted when analysing the issue of food security, which is intrinsically linked to global warming. Africa is an agricultural continent, where around two-thirds of jobs are related to agricultural activities.

Conclusions

Population growth in sub-Saharan Africa will become increasingly significant in the coming decades and will have consequences for both the continent and the rest of the world. Regardless of whether the final extent of the population increase matches the highest or the most moderate forecasts, it will, first and foremost, affect the lives of Africans themselves. This impact can be beneficial if governments implement the appropriate reforms to enable the realisation of the demographic dividend.

To maximise and sustain this opportunity, sound economic and social policies are required. In countries with young populations, substantial investment in education, healthcare and infrastructure is needed, whilst reforms are carried out to support the creation of employment opportunities and more transparent and efficient government institutions.

Sub-Saharan Africa's wealth of critical minerals offers an opportunity to move beyond the mere export of raw materials towards the development of processing industries, thereby generating greater value-added benefits. Indeed, industrial development may be the key driver that sets in motion the virtuous circle leading to the demographic dividend.

A regional policy approach in this area that capitalises on the diversity of minerals, pools resources and also fosters economies of scale can tackle the challenge of industrialisation more effectively than isolated national efforts. Furthermore, and equally important, this regional approach can help restore sovereignty –not only economic but also political– which has been usurped by the old and new interests of the major powers in the natural resources of the African continent.

Population growth will also have an impact on other regions, primarily neighbouring Europe and the Middle East, due to potential migratory pressures. The repercussions will not necessarily be negative, given the labour shortage that will primarily affect European countries stuck in a demographic winter. For centuries, migration has benefited millions

of people worldwide, providing opportunities and enriching the lives of both sending and receiving societies.

Finally, it is important to highlight the challenge that global warming poses for the continent, particularly in terms of food security. African societies will need to strike an optimal balance that reconciles the necessary industrial development and socio-economic growth with the mitigation of the harmful effects of climate change.

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