

Recent Fertility Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa— Workshop Summary

The population of sub-Saharan Africa is projected to double in size by 2050, to 2.1 billion people. This is the highest growth rate among world regions (see Figure 1). The region's fertility rate—5.1 births per woman—is a key factor in this growth, but progress in reducing birth rates in many countries in the region has slowed or stalled. The Committee on Population of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine held a workshop in June 2015, to explore fertility trends in the sub-Saharan region, the factors that influence them, and prospects for promoting faster fertility declines. A report of the workshop *Recent Fertility Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa: Workshop Summary* (2016) is available in both English and French at <http://www.nap.edu/21857>.

CONSEQUENCES OF FERTILITY TRENDS

Developing countries often experience a period of economic growth after reducing their fertility levels and rates of population growth, John Bongaarts of the Population Council reported. The pace of this transition from high-to-low birth rates has been slow in sub-Saharan countries. In his view, the slow pace is partly attributable to the region's comparatively low gross domestic product, life expectancy at birth, primary school enrollment rates, and percentage of the population living in urban areas. Limited investments in family planning programs are also linked to slow declines in fertility rates in the region.

There is considerable diversity in these and other factors across the sub-Saharan region, explained Ann Biddlecom of the Population Division of the United Nations (see Figure 2). This diversity means that population projections vary widely for sub-Saharan countries. Socioeconomic circumstances, policy choices, and other differences among countries make projections for the region as a whole difficult.

John Cleland of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine noted that one outcome of fertility declines may be an increase in the proportion of the population that is earning wages. If this occurs in favorable circumstances—where there is widespread access to jobs, increasing educational attainment, adequate nutrition and health care—a country can achieve significant gains in productivity. Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa do not have these favorable conditions, and increases in populations of young people in those countries may lead to high unemployment and social unrest, he explained. David Lam of the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan noted that the region will need to



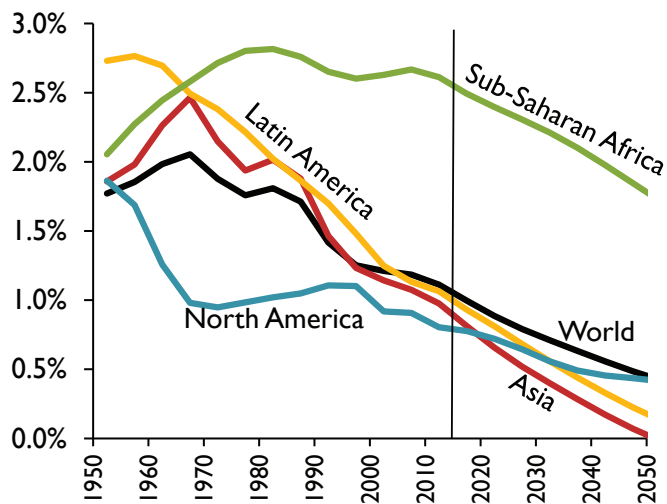


Figure 1 Annual population growth rates, actual and projected, 1950-2050. Source: United Nations (2014).

gain 1.1 million jobs each month over the coming years in order to keep employment rates constant. He suggested that other factors, besides population growth, will also have a significant influence on economic growth. David Canning of the School of Public Health at Harvard University described an economic model that highlights the very large potential economic effects of reducing family size.

TRENDS IN REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

Decisions about family size and contraceptive use determine fertility trends, and numerous factors influence these decisions. John Casterline of the Institute for Population Research at Ohio State University discussed trends in men’s and women’s desire to have another child, noting that fertility desires have long been higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in other regions. Women’s reasons for wishing to control their fertility at different stages of their lives are influenced by the availability of suitable contraceptive methods but also many other factors, both personal and social, explained Ian Timaeus of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Health. These factors include rates of child mortality, availability of productive employment options for women, economic support for the elderly, access to birth control technology, perceptions that childbearing is a choice, economic instability, and cultural traditions.

Parfait Eloundou-Enyegue of Cornell University also discussed socioeconomic trends that influence fertility. He described a theoretical approach to analyzing the different factors that influence fertility, such as characteristics of population groups, behavioral responses to policy changes, and seemingly unre-

lated developments that turn out to affect decisions about childbearing.

Veronique Hertrich of the Institut National d’Etudes Démographiques added another perspective, explaining that sub-Saharan African women are, on average, the youngest in the world at the time of their first marriages. Analysis shows variation in marriage patterns across the region and indicates that a fertility decline tends not to occur where the age at first marriage is below 18 years and is not likely to occur until the median age at marriage reaches 19 years.

Maggwa Baker Ndugga of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation focused on fertility trends and policies in Kenya and Ghana. These two countries were the first in the region to launch population policies but have experienced different social and economic circumstances. Differences in their fertility trends highlight the importance of understanding the very different contraceptive needs of women in different economic, social, and national circumstances.

EFFECTS OF CONTRACEPTIVE PRACTICE

Several presenters discussed research on contraceptive use and factors that affect decision making regarding family planning.

- Akinrinola Bankole of the Guttmacher Institute reported that use of contraceptives, particularly modern methods, is low in the region, and that only four in ten women wish to avoid pregnancy.

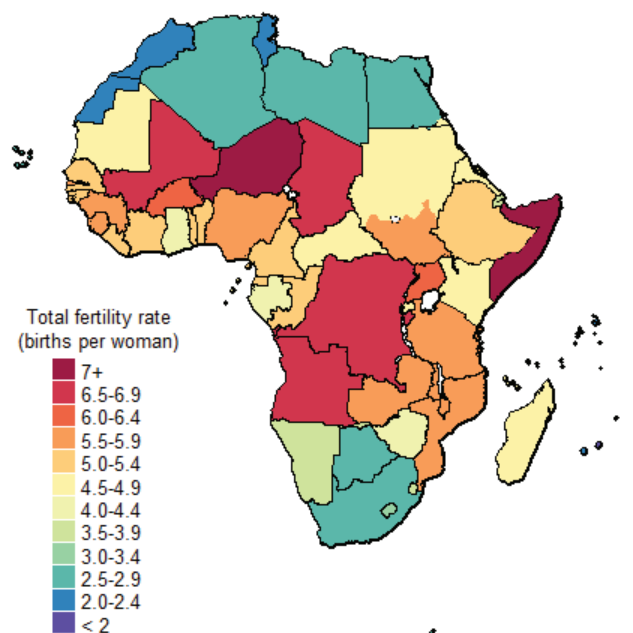


Figure 2 Diversity in fertility rates across African nations, 2005-2010. Source: Biddlecom (2015).

However, modern contraceptives and abortions have helped prevent fertility rates from being even higher.

- Clementine Rossier of the Institut de Demographie et Socioeconomie of the University of Geneva discussed the use of modern, traditional, and neo-traditional (requiring no contact with health care professionals but based on modern knowledge) contraceptive methods. Women’s behaviors, attitudes, and needs vary across geographical areas, life stages, and socioeconomic status, she explained, and there is considerable unmet need for satisfactory contraceptive methods.
- Amy Tsui of Johns Hopkins University, who reviewed data on contraceptive preferences and practices, emphasized the diversity of the sub-Saharan countries. The use of modern contraception is increasing in the sub-Saharan region overall (see Figure 3), she noted, and the significant differences in national patterns demonstrate the profound effects of policies on contraceptive access and use.
- Donatien Beguy of the African Population and Health Research Center discussed family planning among the urban poor, noting that in many areas health care delivery systems are not effective at meeting the need for contraception. As the experience of Kenya illustrates, the urban poor are in particular need of family planning services.

POLICY OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

John May of the Population Reference Bureau opened a discussion of policy and research needs with an overview of the politics of population and family planning policies and programs. Despite progress, he sees numerous challenges for sub-Saharan Africa in reducing its fertility rates and slowing population growth. Cultural traditions and attitudes can be obstacles to limiting family size. Memories of the tragic history of slave trafficking and threats to the survival of many ethnic groups from health crises, such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, contribute to a view that a young and growing population is beneficial. Political support for family planning has been inconsistent across the region and over time, and investment in family planning programs has varied, he observed.

Representatives of donor organizations discussed lessons from their work in the region. Sahlu Haile of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation noted that leaders are under pressure to promote economic growth, and that demonstrating the contribution fertility reductions can make to development is an important way to gain their support. Tim Evans of the World Bank highlighted the varying needs across the region and described programs to increase demand for and access to contraception and to strengthen research on the effectiveness of different approaches.

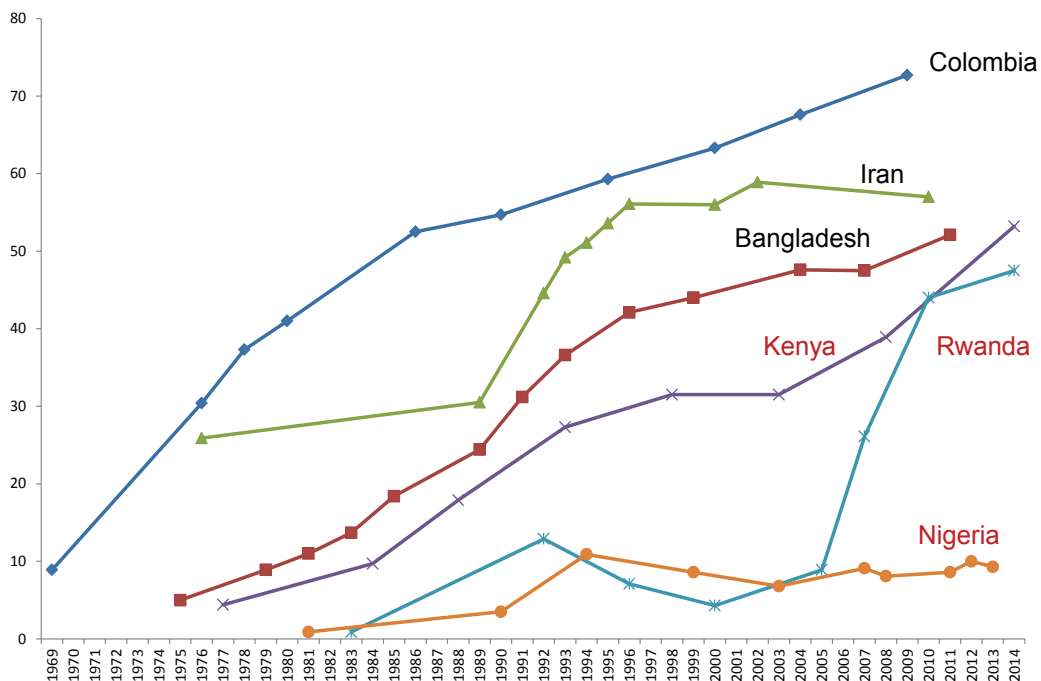


Figure 3 Trends in modern contraceptive prevalence in six countries. Source: Tsui (2015). Data from United Nations (2014). World Contraceptive Use 2014. New York: United Nations.

Ellen Starbird of the U.S. Agency for International Development described indicators the agency uses to track progress in meeting demand for modern contraceptives and the agency's work in promoting family planning, noting that modern contraceptives are the most effective means of preventing pregnancy. The workshop closed with a discussion of researchers' perspectives on fertility trends. Presenters Julia DaVanzo of the RAND Corporation, Alex Ezeh of the African Population and Health Research Center, James Phillips of Columbia University, Eliya Zulu of the African Institute for Development Policy, and Jotham Musinguzi of Partners in Population and Development highlighted the following:

- research opportunities, especially factors that account for successful family planning programs;

- difficulties in collecting needed data and completing analysis of the role of economic and other developments;
- the diversity of experience within countries and across the region;
- the importance of supporting quality of life as the population grows, while also attempting to slow that growth;
- declines in investment in family planning programs, in comparison with other health investments, and declines in research attention to population and health programs; and
- the need for governments to strengthen accountability, reduce corruption, and improve efficiency to advance health and family planning programs.

For More Information . . . This workshop highlights brief was prepared by the Committee on Population (CPOP) based on the workshop summary *Recent Fertility Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa: Workshop Summary* (2016). The workshop was sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this document are those of individual participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of all workshop participants, any organization or agency that provided support for the workshop, the Committee on Population, or the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Copies of the report are available in English and French from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu/21857> or via the CPOP Web page at http://sites.nationalacademies.org/DBASSE/CPOP/Fertility_Trends_Sub_Saharan_Africa.

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