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In pursuit of the demographic dividend: the return of economic justifications for family planning in Africa

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Abstract: *This article examines the resurgence of economic justifications for investment in family planning in Africa. In the Cold War period, population control programmes were at the forefront of the Northern development agenda for the Global South; rapid population growth was cast as the enemy of national economic advancement and modernisation. At the United Nations Conference on Population and Development in 1994, global leaders signed on to a Platform of Action that sidelined economic and environmental concerns with population growth in favour of a human rights approach to family planning. Over the past decade, key sectors of the development community have regained their enthusiasm about the economic and social benefits of reducing fertility in sub-Saharan Africa. A wide variety of multilateral organisations have joined forces with African governments in a common pursuit: lower fertility to achieve demographic transition and harness the demographic dividend. The article contends that efforts to catalyse the demographic dividend are problematic because pursuing dramatic reductions in fertility (rather than reproductive and contraceptive autonomy) violates human rights approaches to sexual and reproductive health.* DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2022.2133352

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Introduction

Since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, family planning has been championed as a means of advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights and a cornerstone of gender equality and women's empowerment. Yet over the past 15 years, the case for contraception based in commitments to rights and health has become nearly inseparable from economic rationales that pin hopes for economic growth to slowing birth rates. This re-articulation of family planning projects to economic development occurred as a new concept, the demographic dividend, gained traction in policy circles and among multilateral organisations and development donors. The demographic dividend describes a potential surge in national economic growth as population structures change during demographic transition. If enabling conditions are in place, the demographic dividend is thought to occur when a large working-age population is supporting fewer dependents. This promise of attaining an economic boom after birth rates fall advances an economic rationale for promoting contraceptives.

The Family Planning 2020 (FP 2020) initiative is arguably the most significant recent development programme that has benefitted from enthusiasm about the demographic dividend. The initiative was launched at the 2012 London Summit on Family Planning, which itself represents a key moment in the evolution of global reproductive rights discourses, policies and programmes. FP2020 articulated an ambitious global goal to reach 120 million girls and women with modern contraceptives by 2020 (known in shorthand as "120 by 20"). FP2020 produced a wave of policy attention and financing aimed at increasing the use of contraceptives. FP2020 (recently rebranded as FP2030) has focused on 69 countries in the Global South, many of which exhibit relatively high birth rates and low rates of contraceptive use. FP2020 promised to empower girls and women through increasing their access to modern contraception, but it also marks a convergence of demographic and economic goals for development. Through its combined emphasis on empowering women, facilitating sustainable development, and sparking economic growth by lowering birth rates, FP2020 marks a return to meeting national development objectives through the promotion of contraception.[1]

This article examines family planning's return to prominence in international development and the accompanying emphasis on economic development via fertility decline. In particular, it analyses how curbing fertility to attain the demographic dividend became the accepted path to a prosperous future for low and middle-income African countries. I suggest that there are several problematic assumptions and implications of the demographic dividend. These include an overemphasis on the role of fertility decline in the economic success of the Asian Tigers and the erasure of the coercive family planning programmes that helped produce lower birth rates in those southeast Asian countries.[2] In addition, the methodological nationalism inherent to modelling the demographic dividend champions state-centred economic development while eliding analysis of asymmetrical global economic conditions.

Of even greater concern is the potential for harm stemming from the instrumentalisation of fertility decline and family planning in pursuit of economic growth through the demographic dividend. Ambitious national plans to accelerate fertility decline often result in family planning services marked by coercion, aggressive promotion of long-acting reversible contraceptives, (LARCS) and violations of informed consent.[3–7] Emphasising the economic benefits of family planning and equating programme success with uptake of contraceptives and fertility decline contradicts the commitment to rights-based sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy articulated in 1994 in Cairo. As the demographic dividend justifies interventions aimed at producing rapid fertility decline to speed up the demographic transition, it has the potential to redirect reproductive health programmes to meet quantitative targets of contraceptive use and fertility reduction. Target-oriented population policies and family planning programmes carry inherent risks: they may narrow contraceptive options to long-acting reversible methods and sterilisation, they may incentivise health care personnel to promote uptake of contraceptives, and they may lead to coercive family planning counselling that compromises informed consent and voluntary contraceptive use.[3,4,7,8]

Despite these troubling implications, slowing population growth to promote economic development and social stability is again at the forefront of development plans for the African continent. After Africa's "lost decade" of structural adjustment in the 1980s and the ensuing Afro-pessimism of the 1990s and 2000s, the past 10 years have seen renewed enthusiasm for Africa's economic potential. Nonetheless, commentators frequently draw attention to the risks of Africa's growing population. According to United Nations population projections, Africa carries the distinction of being the region where more than 50% of expected global population growth will take place through 2050. Policymakers fear that large and growing African populations will continue to outpace state investments in health, education, urban infrastructure and thereby impede economic development.[9,10] Thus the central question for Africa's future is, "Youth dividend or ticking time bomb?"[11] This framing of Africa's development challenges depicts a continent at a demographic crossroads. As birth rates slow, Africa faces a potential bulge in the working-age population that might produce significant economic growth and development, but if uneducated and underemployed, could become a source of social instability.[12] In this ticking time bomb scenario, large youthful populations will exacerbate unemployment, spark widespread protests, accelerate clandestine migration to Europe and contribute to political instability if their potential productivity is not harnessed.[11,13–15] These scenarios imply that a combined strategy of slowing fertility to limit population growth and transforming potentially dangerous youth into productive citizens are key to a desirable future.

In response to the opportunities and risks represented by this demographic crossroads, a heterogeneous set of actors has coalesced in a common pursuit: lower fertility to harness the demographic dividend and avoid social instability. The African Union's ambitious Agenda 2063 depicts a continent striving for unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity, and the demographic dividend has become the cornerstone for achieving this vision.[16] The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the Bill and Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health at Johns Hopkins University, the World Bank and the United Nations Population Fund have also embraced the demographic dividend as a cornerstone of development policy and planning for Africa. While birth rates are slowing gradually in most countries, supporters of the demographic dividend suggest that accelerating this transition (e.g. curbing birth rates rapidly) can produce dramatic economic advantages.

Rather than debate the finer points of demographic dividend theory (a robust literature in economics already does that), this article interrogates how and why this concept became hegemonic. After providing a brief overview of the demographic transition and the demographic dividend, I review how a consensus about the demographic dividend emerged and highlight implications of viewing the demographic dividend as the key to Africa's future.

Demographic transition and demographic dividend theory

Classic demographic transition theory suggests that countries follow a similar path to stable birth and death rates.[17,18] Countries that are "pre-development" or "pre-modernization" experience high fertility rates, high death rates and little population growth. As modernisation or development occurs (e.g. industrialisation, expanding health infrastructure and primary health care, improvements to water and sanitation), death rates begin to decline before birth rates. This phase of the transition increases overall population size. As countries continue to transition, birth rates fall and population growth stabilises. Demographic transition theory offers explanatory frameworks for how and when this transition occurs. It has been widely critiqued for providing an ahistorical account of demographic change in Europe, for asserting that mortality always declines before fertility, and for identifying socio-economic modernisation as a precondition for fertility decline.[19,20] Critics argue that there are no universal models for understanding changes in population dynamics over time,[20–24] and empirical analysis suggests that there are no singular or straightforward explanations for fertility declines.[19,22]

The demographic dividend is defined by the United Nations Population Fund as, "the temporary economic benefit that a country can earn from a significant increase in the ratio of working working-age adults relative to young dependents that is created by a rapid decline in birth rates" and it is a further elaboration of the demographic transition UNFPA.[25] Demographic dividend theory suggests that countries experiencing a demographic transition have the potential to catalyse economic growth and increase standards of living. The demographic dividend concept shifted longstanding debates among economists and demographers about the relationship between population change and economic growth by highlighting age structure. The key feature in demographic dividend theory is a population age structure in which a large and productive working-age population has a low dependency or support ratio (i.e. it does not support large numbers of elderly or young dependents). Countries with comparatively high birth rates (resulting in large numbers of young dependents or high dependence ratios) face barriers to development because earnings are spent on dependents rather than saved or invested.[26] In order to promote economic development, governments must meet two preconditions. First, birth rates must decrease to achieve the demographic transition, which produces a more optimal national age structure with a lower youth dependency ratio and greater potential for earnings to be saved or invested. Second, in the context of an advantageous national age structure, governments must increase employment of their working age population. In demographic dividend theory, this productivity can be achieved with a mix of economic and social policies. There is only a brief "window of opportunity" in the middle of the demographic transition to achieve the dividend when the youth dependency ratio is low.[25] If this window is missed, the large working-age population will age and dependency ratios will increase again to support this large elderly population. A second dividend is possible as life expectancy increases and working-age individuals increase savings to support themselves during retirement (when they might previously have been dependent on working-age family members).[27]

The demographic dividend was first articulated by Harvard economist David Bloom and colleagues as they examined the role that changing population age structures played in the economic growth of the Asian Tiger countries.[28–30] As this concept has been taken up by development planners, it has been understood in varying ways. In their interviews with development experts, policy advocates and academic researchers, Hilbig et al[2] encountered two key understandings of the demographic dividend. They found that development actors operate with either "a reductionist, technical perception of the DD as 'automatic' changes in a population's age structure following a fertility decline over time"[2 p.144] or as a process that requires a variety of investments to materialise and should therefore be thought of as an opportunity but not an inevitable process. Importantly, their research indicates that simplified demographic explanations for economic growth are appealing to politicians and alike.

Support for the demographic dividend – which Hilbig et al[2] call the "buzz" – is widespread despite the fact that it can only be realised after a significant decline in birth rates, which demographers still place far on the horizon for most African countries. Attaining the demographic dividend also requires significant capital investment and job growth, both of which have proved elusive in many African settings. In the policy documents reviewed for this article, most proponents of the demographic dividend acknowledge that the economic benefit of the dividend is not guaranteed. Nonetheless, there is widespread consensus that by decreasing birth rates, optimising age structure, and investing strategically, transitioning countries can reap an economic windfall.[31–33] The demographic dividend has attained a largely unquestioned and prominent role in imaginings of Africa's future. In the remainder of this article, I review the rise of the demographic dividend concept and critique its current application as an economic incentive for reducing fertility. The next section reviews the emergence of the demographic dividend and places it within the broader history of population policies and programmes. I then examine the rise of the demographic dividend in development planning in Africa and its use as a policy tool. Finally, I offer several critiques of mobilising the demographic dividend as a development goal.

From Cairo to London: what role for population in development planning?

Population science has played a large role in US policy vis-à-vis developing countries, and sociologists, historians and philosophers of science have described how demography has shaped debates about the reciprocal influences of population size, population growth and economic growth.[6,24,34–36] In the post-WWII period, the rise of demographic transition theory provided a means of governing population growth at a massive scale, and applications of demographic transition theory were visible in the population control programmes funded by American foundations and carried out by the United States Agency for International Development in the Cold War period.[6,24,34] In the 1960s and 1970s, family planning proponents used the ambiguous relationship between economic development and fertility decline to their advantage by advancing population control programmes to lower birth rates even in the absence of economic development.[6,23,34]

After several decades of concerted efforts by the United States and allies to lower fertility in developing countries, partially as an effort to spark modernisation and combat Communism, the deliberations at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 produced a compromise in global population policy[34] (Hartmann 1987). The acceptability and feasibility of achieving modernisation and economic growth through fertility decline were very much in question, which facilitated the shift to human rights language in the Cairo Platform of Action.[36,37] Feminists and reproductive health experts often regard Cairo as an (imperfect) turn away from coercive population control to a rights-based approach to sexual and reproductive health.[4,38–40] Since 1994, global and national population programmes have emphasised women's empowerment, human rights and bodily autonomy.

The early era of human rights approaches saw weakening expenditure on family planning and declining access to reproductive health care in many countries.[41,42] The population establishment experienced significant funding decreases as global leaders struggled to respond to millions of HIV infections and deaths from AIDS-related complications.[39,43,44] Although the fifth Millennium Development Goal, Maternal Health, implied support for universal access to family planning, financial support for family planning languished. While family planning programmes lost ground in the 1990s and 2000s, scholarship on the economic potential of demographic transition and rapid fertility decline was on the rise and has now matured into a robust field of analysis and debate in economics. Interest in population age structures (which Murphy refers to as the hegemony of age structure) has gained considerable traction among development experts over the past two decades.[24] Bloom et al.[27] have been cited over 1000 times, and the demographic dividend has become a key concept in policy and advocacy publications funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, UNFPA and USAID.[45–50] The National Transfer Accounts (NTA) project produces much of the leading scholarship on the economic implications of population age structure, and one of its foci is the potential demographic dividend in Africa. The East–West Center, the Center for the Economics and Demography of Aging, University of California at Berkeley and the Foundation for Economics Education in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire are key members of the NTA network working with research teams in Africa to improve understanding of the demographic dividend. This work is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation through the Bill & Melinda Gates Institute of Population and Reproductive Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Enthusiasm for the demographic dividend stems in part from analyses of the Asian Tigers; economists argue that as much as 40% of the economic growth that they experienced was due to rapid fertility decline.[29,51] Yet the unique convergence of factors that produced this unprecedented economic growth over a relatively short period of time (rapid demographic transition, strong national cohesion, great absorptive capacity of labour markets and the extent of economic development that preceded demographic transition in addition to coercive family planning programmes) are seldom highlighted in the existing scholarship.[2] Instead, debates about the demographic dividend address the significance of demographic transition to the Asian Miracle and question whether African countries are poised to reap the divided based on current demographic trends.[32,33,52,53]

The population establishment began to regroup in the 2000s, partly due to Melinda Gates' enthusiasm for family planning, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) launched a new family planning programme in 2008.[54] The financial support and advocacy work of the BMGF returned contraception to the global health agenda, and renewed donor interest in contraception helped generate enthusiasm about marshalling demographic trends for development. An International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP) launched in Uganda in 2009 with a follow-up conference in Senegal in 2011. These conferences now occur every two years and attract thousands of attendees. The Gates Institute became actively involved in promoting the demographic dividend framework in 2011, and organised (with the World Bank) a special Demographic Dividend side seminar for African Ministers of Finance and Development at the International Conference on Family Planning in Dakar, Senegal that year.[45]

The demographic dividend has featured prominently at the successive International Conferences in 2013, 2016 and 2018,[45] at stakeholder meetings in Washington, DC, and at joint conferences of the United Nations Economic Commission and African Union Commission. The 2018 conference in Kigali Rwanda touted "Investing for a Lifetime of Returns" and highlighted the benefits of the demographic dividend. In addition to donor enthusiasm and a newly mobilised set of population actors, the administrations of Barack Obama in the United States and David Cameron in the UK were favourable to increased spending in family planning. This conjunction of political viability and donor interest culminated in the London Family Planning Summit, co-hosted by DFID and the BMGF on World Population Day in 2012.

The London Family Planning Summit resulted in the FP 2020 initiative, an initiative with the goal of getting 120 million girls and women to use modern contraceptives by the year 2020. Although there is a broad range of modern contraceptives, including oral contraceptive pills, contraceptive patch and vaginal ring, intrauterine device (IUD), and female and male condoms, FP2020 placed particular emphasis and financing efforts into increasing the distribution of injectables and implants.[3,4] FP2020 effectively mobilised government and donor support and elicited national commitments from many countries in the global South. A 2019 report indicates reaching 53 million additional users of contraception many of whom began using long-acting reversible methods including implants and injectables. (FP 2020 2019)[81] FP2020 was successful at reenergising the global family planning movement and constructing a durable network of multilateral, government and non-governmental partners, and the initiative is in the midst of rebranding as FP2030 with the aim of decentralising its administrative structures and becoming "stronger, smarter, and more inclusive". Nonetheless, FP2020's emphasis on setting ambitious country goals for contraceptive use (glossed as "commitments") creates favourable conditions for both structural and interpersonal coercion in family planning programmes.[7]

Broad mobilisation around FP2020 seems connected at least in part to the enthusiasm of donors and multilateral development organisations for the demographic dividend. The expansion of scholarship on the demographic dividend generated interest in the economic benefits of accelerating demographic transitions by expanding access to family planning.[54,55] The economic potential of the demographic dividend therefore validates large-scale spending on contraception. The London Family Planning Summit capitalised on this strategic moment and positioned access to contraception as a core tenet of social and economic development. Policymakers were quick to embrace the goal of accelerating demographic transition in tandem with FP2020's significant financial investment in promoting modern contraceptives. Yet FP 2020's moderate success at sparking uptake of contraceptives, despite national targets and considerable investment in family planning, offers a sober reminder of the difficulty of accelerating demographic transitions.

Banking on the demographic dividend in Africa

Africa's poverty and growing population have long troubled observers. In the 1980s, the World Bank referred to Africa's rate of population growth as the nightmare scenario that was responsible for economic stagnation and widespread poverty.[56,p. 32] Prior to the Cairo meeting, much US aid to Africa focused on developing national population policies and launching family planning programmes.[34,57] The emergence of clandestine migration in the 1990s, particularly to the Canary Islands, and its acceleration and high death toll in the 2000s, increased European concerns about a continent teeming with unemployed and frustrated youth.[58] Despite these concerns, in the 1990s and 2000s family planning efforts took a backseat to AIDS prevention and treatment. As deaths from AIDS have stabilised and some African countries moved towards a demographic transition, the demographic dividend emerged as the economic hope for the continent's poor countries.

The Gates Institute is a key actor supporting demographic dividend research in Africa. The Gates Institute has worked to build demographic dividend research capacity in African research institutes. One institute, CREFAT in Senegal, partnered with UNFPA to develop profiles for 23 countries in West and Central Africa meant to inform demographic dividend policies and programmes.[45] As the demographic dividend concept has gained policy traction, Gates Institute researchers have turned their attention to developing demographic dividend indicators and scorecards. Their recently launched Demographic Dividend Effort Index (DDEI) provides assessments of African countries and their current efforts to bring about the dividend (https://demographicdividend.org/ddeffortindex/).

UNFPA is another actor in the arena of sexual and reproductive health on the African continent and it too is a major advocate for incorporating the demographic dividend into national development plans and developing national demographic dividend profiles. UNFPA had little influence or financial support in the post-Cairo period, but the demographic dividend offers compelling economic justifications for investing in sexual and reproductive health. UNFPA is now advancing its core mission through demographic dividend advocacy. A UNFPA white paper explains, "The demographic dividend presents an opportunity for UNFPA to draw a *clear causal line from the empowerment of young women and the delivery SRHR* [sexual and reproductive health and rights] *to sustainable economic development*, garnering the interest of governments to investments that have been undervalued in the past".[59,p.5] In 2017, the West and Central Africa Regional Office stated that it had one objective, "to put our agenda of harnessing the demographic dividend in our region to work".[60, p.3]

African demographers, economic planners, and policymakers have also taken up the demographic dividend. The African Population Commission (a working group that became the African Population Experts Committee of the African Union in 2015) began advocating for the demographic dividend as early as 2007 and convened a regional conference with UNFPA in 2013.[61] The 2012 African Union State of Africa Population Report *Harnessing the demographic dividend for the socio-economic development of Africa* warns that not all countries are poised to take advantage of Africa's demographic transition, and it urges policymakers to harness the demographic dividend to improve sustainable development.[13] Without adequate investment to transform a large youth population into a productive force for economic development, these young people may become a disaffected and destabilising force.[13, p.33] Of particular concern is the youth unemployment rate, and political leaders are urged to ensure that the 15.3 million African youth attaining working age each year are both employable and able to find suitable employment.[13, p.31] Overall, the report recognises that the demographic dividend requires substantial investment, and it calls for strategies to improve gender equality, education, health services, nutrition and food security, and to stem migration and brain drain alongside improving access to a wide range of contraceptive methods and working to change socio-cultural ideas about ideal family size to catalyse fertility decline.[13, p.50] African Union leaders lobbied for the inclusion of the demographic dividend in the Sustainable Development Goals, and suggest that, "This was one of the key contributions of Africa to the 2030 Agenda".[61, p.4]

The African Union's Executive Council continues to assert the importance of the demographic dividend for the continent's development. By 2017, the concept had gained momentum and the African Union theme of the year was "Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth". The Union published an *AU Road Map on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth* to coincide with the theme.[15,61] This roadmap describes the "urgent necessity to transform the potential of Africa's large youth population, often referred to as the youth bulge, into a demographic dividend".[15, p.2] The AU roadmap evokes many of the traditional assumptions about the relationships between population size, dependency ratios, and economic and political stability in African countries, and it highlights many challenges that the continent faces. The roadmap casts investing to harness the demographic dividend as the antidote to these structural challenges.

African leaders' embrace of the demographic dividend seems to represent a break with past ambivalence about population policies and family planning programmes. Whereas family planning and achieving the Cairo Platform of Action received tepid support and minimal financing, the economic promise of the demographic dividend has provided African leaders with a compelling rationale for pursuing population programmes designed to curtail fertility.[62] As Hilbig et al[2] argue, the demographic dividend's simplistic models of economic growth are appealing to politicians and elected leaders. Given the necessary investments in health, education and workforce development alongside family planning programmes, the demographic dividend promises a comprehensive approach to economic development rather than a narrow focus on fertility decline.

Population and development experts recognise that the dividend is out of reach unless African governments can rapidly reduce birth rates to accelerate the demographic transition. Over the past decade, these actors have commissioned dozens of national studies, published research reports and advocacy briefs, and held demographic dividend workshops and trainings. Key nodes in the demographic dividend research network include the World Bank, the African Institute for Demographic Policy (AFIDEP), the East–West Center, the World Economic Forum, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), the Bill and Melinda Gates Institute and the Futures Group. Funders include UNFPA, USAID, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Flora and William Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the UK Department for International Development (DFID).[4,63,64] One exemplar is the US $170 million Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project, financed by the World Bank with technical assistance from UNFPA, itself supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.[65,66]

The demographic dividend enables a range of policies, programmes and initiatives by this diverse group. Some supporters of demographic dividend policy frameworks emphasise that they provide government officials with a compelling case for investing in gender equity, girls' education and youth more broadly.[59,61] For other actors, particularly those aligned with the FP 2020 initiative, the demographic dividend translates into national targets for contraceptive use and aggressive promotion of contraception to achieve the demographic transition more rapidly.[4] This emphasis on rapid uptake of contraception and reducing birth rates represents a move away from rights-based approaches to population policy promised at Cairo.

The demographic dividend at work

The demographic dividend concept shifted from being a subject of research to a *de facto* policy rationale in less than a decade, but as of now, there is scant evidence of the results of demographic dividend-inspired policies aimed at economic growth. Nonetheless, the potential payoff of the dividend offers government planners incentives for using it as a policy framework. Economists stress that the demographic dividend is not a forgone conclusion, but must instead be "harnessed".[31] Both in spite of and because of this uncertainty, several platforms have been created to assist countries in formulating policies (typically investments in family planning, education, workforce development) that will put them on the path to achieving the dividend.[45,47]

There are currently three frameworks for modelling the demographic dividend. The two most widely used are the NTA approach and the DemDiv simulation tool (developed by the Health Policy Project, a USAID-funded project of the Futures Group). A third and more recently developed model is the Canning–Karra–Wilde (CKW) macrosimulation.[67] Each model has traction in particular research networks and with various donors and multilateral institutions. UNFPA has adopted the NTA approach, which has been most widely applied in francophone West Africa through the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project. The CKW model is less visible in programmatic circles in Africa, although the Population Reference Bureau, the PopPov research network, and Harvard Center for Population and Development recently organised a workshop for African researchers to train them in using the CKW model for policy planning.

A detailed analysis of these tools is beyond the scope of this paper, but a review of key features of the DemDiv tool illustrates the economic, demographic and investment scenarios African leaders can explore. Its developers explain that DemDiv "can inform policymakers in high-fertility countries of the potential benefits of the demographic dividend and increase their support for investments in the multisectoral policies required to achieve those benefits".[68,p.v] The tool works in concert with an earlier population simulation tool called RAPID (Resources for the Awareness of Population Impacts on Development), and it allows users to explore multiple scenarios showing how investments in family planning (to achieve the demographic transition), education and the economy can generate a demographic dividend not possible under the status quo. The DemDiv simulator invites governments to consider these scenarios and then to invest based on their development goals. Created in response to "the growing enthusiasm among policymakers for the potential economic benefits of the demographic dividend",[68] DemDiv encourages governments to change their population structure and invest in education and economic reforms in hopes of achieving economic growth.

The DemDiv tool rests on two inter-related submodels.[68,69] Users plug in country-level data to generate economic and demographic projections. These inputs include demographic policy variables: contraceptive prevalence rate, sterility rate, postpartum insusceptibility, and girls' education and economic variables. A key metric is the total fertility rate (the number of children a woman would have across her reproductive lifetime if current patterns prevailed), which the model assumes will decrease by increasing the availability of contraception. After entering their data, DemDiv users may explore the isolated and combined effects of economic, educational, and demographic policies on GDP, GDP per capita and GDP growth rate.[68] The DemDiv model allows users to manipulate complex social, demographic and economic processes to elicit desired outcomes. Typical scenarios include "business as usual" (baseline trends), the "economic-only" scenario (investments in financial markets, labour markets, etc.), the "economic + education scenario" (improvement in human resources through education) and the combined scenarios of "economics + education + family planning". The most significant economic improvements are projected for the "combined" scenarios, which assume dramatic declines in fertility through rapid uptake of contraceptives.

Uganda and Kenya were the first countries in Africa to participate in DemDiv modelling exercises. The Health Policy Project worked with the Kenyan National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) as it developed the model to pilot test the software. Following DemDiv projections, if Kenya attains a contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) of 70% by 2050 it would "balance Kenya's age structure, with the workingage population growing to 73% of the total population".[70] With higher usage of contraception and strategic investment, the DemDiv model suggests that by 2050 fertility in Kenya will decline from 4.6 to 2.1 children per woman, average completed education will rise from 6 to 11 years among adults, 90% of the working population will be employed, and GDP per capita will increase from $900 to $11,300.[72]

DemDiv exercises in Uganda and Malawi offer similarly optimistic scenarios of population shifts accompanied by economic growth. The Ugandan policy brief highlights that if current trends continue, the country will only achieve 30% of the educational and economic goals outlined in its Vision 2040 plan. In contrast, if the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) increases from 27% to 67%, accompanied by investments in the education system and the economy, Uganda could achieve its educational goals Uganda National Planning Authority.[73] In Malawi's case, desired economic growth would require reducing total fertility from 5.6 children per women to 3.0 per woman, which would likely require a CPR of 60% rather than the current 46%.[74]

The benefits of investing to attain the demographic dividend are presented in these policy briefs as self-evident, "The demographic dividend offers Malawi an opportunity to stimulate economic development and improved well-being for its people in less than 30 years".[71,p.3] A similar macro simulation exercise for Nigeria using the CKW model projected that a decline of one child per woman in a fifteen-year period would almost double per capita income by 2060.[67] Advocates of the demographic dividend as a macro-economic development framework stress that its benefits are not automatic and must be "earned" through appropriate planning and investment. Nonetheless, the DemDiv scenarios allow government planners to forecast dramatic decreases in fertility followed by significant economic gains unencumbered by the complexities of bringing these policies and investments to fruition. The positive outcomes of the demographic dividend appear to be within reach if government planners make the correct policy choices. These potential best-case scenarios stand in stark contrast to the current evidence about desired family size and fertility decline in most African countries, and reaching these scenarios would likely require aggressive social marketing campaigns (to say nothing of the potential for more coercive tactics) to change reproductive behaviour.[72] These models and programme manuals also fail to recognise that decades of investment in family planning in sub-Saharan Africa, including FP2020 investments, have produced only gradual declines in fertility, not the dramatic decreases observed in the Asian Tigers that undergird the demographic dividend model.[62]

Many economic assumptions and uncertainties underlie each of the demographic dividend models. Debates continue about the economic advantages of lower dependency ratios and changing population age structures, with some demographers arguing that it is educational improvements that stimulate economic growth, rather than shifting age structures.[73,74] These models also cannot account for the varied political and economic processes that may affect poor African countries (the current novel coronavirus pandemic being a case in point). Instead, demographic dividend models imply that African nations are autonomous and solely responsible for their citizens' economic destinies. Many African governments have long aspired to increase their investments in human resources, education and health systems. Reinforcing the rationale for these investments using demographic dividend projections sidesteps the question of why these investments have failed to materialise to date and how probable these investments are in the present or near future.

Like all models, demographic dividend simulation and modelling tools simplify the complex social processes that shape reproductive lives. Perhaps more importantly, mobilising policy to spark a rapid demographic transition runs the risk of sidelining rights-based approaches and voluntary uses of contraception. Setting numeric targets for contraceptive use can skew sexual and reproductive health services towards the promotion of long-acting reversible contraceptives and enable coercive practices in the provision of family planning services. As but one example, in a recent study of a model family planning programme in sub-Saharan Africa, Senderowicz found evidence that family planning providers were incentivised to use coercive tactics and that users of family planning experienced biased counselling, limited methods mix and refusal to remove contraceptive implants.[7, p. 8] Demographic objectives, pursued in the name of economic growth, shift programmatic focus away from individual sexual and reproductive rights to achieving population objectives. In the not so distant past, this kind of emphasis on population-level outcomes narrowed the types of reproductive health interventions perceived as effective and thus worthy of continued financing.[6,34,36]

Harnessing family planning for economic development

Deploying the demographic dividend as a development tool is misguided for several reasons. First, the concept originated in scholars' attempts to understand the extraordinary economic success of the Asian Tigers. In the Asian Tiger countries, significant economic development was already underway prior to demographic transition and their economies were better integrated into the global capitalist system. Importantly, these countries attained fertility decline using voluntary and coercive tactics and their governments operated as what Fukuyama refers to as "benevolent dictatorships".[2,p.142] In spite of these particularities, Asia's unique experience has become a model for vastly different countries to emulate. Demographic dividend scenarios offer compelling projections of economic growth, yet there is limited evidence beyond the experience of Asian countries to justify the most optimistic predictions. Its applicability in African countries is seldom questioned, yet there are significant differences between the Asian Tigers and African countries. Many African countries are likely decades away from experiencing a demographic transition, they have much higher dependency ratios than the pre-dividend ratios among the Asian Tigers, and many more members of the working-age population are unemployed or underemployed in the informal sector.[74] Rather than question the feasibility of the model as a planning tool, advocates of the demographic dividend emphasise that it is not automatic and must be "attained", "harnessed" and "pursued". The model's uncertainties are externalised and positioned as policy variables that African governments can manipulate with proper investment.

Second, the rise of the demographic dividend as a development tool coincided with and has reinforced the resurgence of global enthusiasm for family planning. In contrast to the lacklustre support of the Cairo Program of Action, the London Family Planning Summit in 2012 and the subsequent FP2020 initiative have received widespread political support and millions in financial contributions. FP2020 missed its goal of getting 120 million girls and women on contraception by 2020, but it furthered the alignment of global family planning programmes with national economic goals and the SDGs. As scholar and activist Sonia Correa noted as early as the mid-2000s, family planning champions have needed a new and stronger economic rationale to support family planning (Correa in Hendrixson[75]). The demographic dividend has provided this rationale. FP2020 mobilises the language of empowerment, gender equity and human rights, and the newly launched FP 2030 echoes these themes, yet FP2020 supporters recognised that advocates must highlight the links between family planning and economic growth. Investing in contraceptives (as opposed to more comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care) has been repackaged as a necessary investment to get the dividend.[68]

The ambitious promotion of family planning and fertility decline necessary to achieve a demographic transition, and a subsequent demographic dividend, raises questions about how national population policies and programmes might be shaped by demographic dividend projections. At the time of writing, at least one scholarly article had drawn the explicit link between FP 2020 goals for contraceptive use and the demographic dividend.[55] The co-authors (whose research is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) conducted an economic analysis of the potential benefit for India and Nigeria of meeting their FP 2020 targets. They conclude that, "the tremendous economic benefits from meeting FP2020 and SDG family planning targets demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of investment in promoting access to contraceptive methods".[55,p.1] Calculations of return on investment in contraceptives again elide commitments to human rights and informed choice in favour of economic benefits from reducing fertility.

Some demographic dividend enthusiasts recognise that economic benefit from shifts in population age structure is difficult to equate with increased well-being and economic security at the individual or household level. Starbird et al[76] concede that while increasing the use of family planning is central to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), "at the individual and household level, experts note that identifying the effects of demographic factors on economic welfare has proved elusive".[76, p.202] Yet it is at this scale that individuals and families balance the relative advantages of contraceptive use and family size. There is tremendous potential for contradictions between national population policies in pursuit of the demographic dividend, goals for increasing the use contraceptives, and individual reproductive desires.[8] The best-case scenarios in the DemDiv simulation tool provide policy-makers with a powerful financial incentive to curtail fertility. Yet the Cairo Platform of Action's insistence on voluntary and informed use of contraception was an effort to protect individuals from coercive state population programmes that sought to facilitate economic growth and reduce poverty through top-down population control.

Another cause for concern is the extent to which literature on current population trends in Africa evokes neo-Malthusian fears of growing youth populations, and in some cases deploys these images overtly to convey the urgency of reducing fertility. As Sukarieh and Tannock note, the notion of a "youth bulge" has become a euphemism for describing, "expanding surplus populations in the post-welfare and development state era".[12, p.885] One UNDP post describes the current youth population in Africa in neo-Malthusian terms as follows, "Without **urgent and sustained action**, the spectre of a migration crisis looms that **no wall, navy, or coastguard** can hope to stop. 10 to 12 million young people join the African labour force each year, yet the continent creates only 3.7 million jobs annually"[10, p. 2] (emphasis in original). For these commenters, by their sheer numbers, unemployed youth are poised to create an unstoppable tide headed towards Europe unless the global community and African governments invest in fertility decline, youth education and job creation. Absent from this depiction is a more holistic socio-economic analysis of the global factors that shape international migration and diminish the options for African youth in their home countries.

Overpopulation in Africa serves as a catchall explanation for poverty, political instability, and legal and clandestine migration, leading some commentators to advocate promoting incentives for the use of contraception.[3,63,77] While these discourses are distinct from the demographic dividend concept, the dividend concept provides a strong economic incentive to increase uptake of contraceptives and to skew family planning programmes towards provider-controlled methods like long-acting reversible contraceptives and sterilisation.[3] The demographic dividend offers an economic rationale to a wide variety of stakeholders seeking to achieve the SDGs, meet FP 2020 country goals, prevent migration to Europe or promote long-term investments in health, education and workforce development.

A final striking feature of the demographic dividend is the extent to which African leaders appear to support it as the policy centrepiece for Africa's future. The demographic dividend has the potential to mobilise much-needed investment in health, education and workforce development, but it depicts nation-states as the engines of economic growth and development. Such a formula fails to acknowledge legacies of colonialism, imperialism, trade policies, corruption and capitalist extraction from the continent, or the ways that African states are enmeshed in a global capitalist economy. More to the point, the demographic dividend diverts attention from global inequalities. In the early days of population policy and fertility reduction initiatives, leaders from the global South resisted development plans that called for dramatic fertility reduction in the name of modernisation and economic growth.[34,78,79] The potential economic payoff of the demographic dividend and the rationale it provides for broad investments in human capital may have blunted political resistance to population policies.[2,4,8,80]

Since the 1994 Cairo ICPD meetings, sexual and reproductive health programmes have emphasised the importance of individual, rights-based approaches to family planning. The embrace of demographic dividend theory by a wide range of development institutions poses a challenge to rights-based approaches. Enthusiasm for economic growth by accelerating the demographic transition through the rapid and wide-scale uptake of contraceptives marks a decisive step away from Cairo's emphasis on rights and individual autonomy. While the Cairo platform was a definitive rejection of population control programmes of the past, the surge in interest in harnessing the demographic dividend indicates that manipulating population dynamics is once again at the forefront of economic development.

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Résumé

Cet article examine la résurgence des justifications économiques pour les investissements en faveur de la planification familiale en Afrique. À l'époque de la guerre froide, les programmes de régulation des naissances étaient au premier rang du programme de développement du Nord pour le Sud; on estimait qu'une croissance démographique rapide était l'ennemie du progrès économique et de la modernisation des pays. En 1994, les dirigeants mondiaux réunis pour la Conférence des Nations Unies sur la population et le développement ont adopté un Programme d'action qui écartait les préoccupations économiques et environnementales causées par la croissance démographique en faveur d'une approche de la planification familiale fondée sur les droits de l'homme. Au cours de la dernière décennie, des secteurs clés de la communauté du développement ont retrouvé leur enthousiasme pour les avantages économiques et sociaux d'une réduction de la fécondité en Afrique subsaharienne. Un large éventail d'organisations multilatérales ont joint leurs forces avec les gouvernements africains autour d'un objectif commun: diminuer la fécondité pour parvenir à la transition démographique et exploiter le dividende démographique. L'article avance que les activités destinées à catalyser le dividende démographique sont problématiques car la recherche de réductions spectaculaires de la fécondité (plutôt que l'autonomie reproductive et contraceptive) viole les approches des droits de l'homme en matière de santé sexuelle et reproductive.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el resurgimiento de justificaciones económicas para invertir en planificación familiar en África. En el período de la Guerra Fría, los programas de control de la población estaban en primer plano en la agenda de desarrollo Septentrional para el Sur Global; el rápido crecimiento demográfico fue considerado como el enemigo del progreso económico nacional y de la modernización. En la Conferencia sobre la Población y el Desarrollo de las Naciones Unidas, celebrada en 1994, líderes mundiales firmaron la Plataforma de Acción que dejó al margen las preocupaciones económicas y ambientales relacionadas con el crecimiento de la población a favor de un enfoque de planificación familiar basado en los derechos humanos. En la última década, sectores clave de la comunidad de desarrollo han recuperado el entusiasmo respecto a los beneficios económicos y sociales de reducir la fertilidad en África subsahariana. Una gran variedad de organizaciones multilaterales han unido fuerzas con gobiernos africanos en un esfuerzo común: reducir la fertilidad para lograr la transición demográfica y aprovechar el dividendo demográfico. El artículo sostiene que los esfuerzos por catalizar el dividendo demográfico son problemáticos porque buscar reducciones drásticas en la fertilidad (en vez de autonomía reproductiva y anticonceptiva) viola los enfoques de salud sexual y reproductiva basados en los derechos humanos.