

New Study: “Africa’s Demographic Trailblazers: How falling fertility rates accelerate development”

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Nowhere else in the world is the population growing as fast as it is in Africa – by 2050, the number of people living on the continent will have almost doubled. Even today, many states in Africa are unable to provide their citizens with adequate food, health services and education and sufficient numbers of jobs. Yet some regional trailblazers have shown how a prudent demographic policy can contribute to slowing down the fertility rate and which factors are key to achieving this decline.

Africa’s strong population growth poses an enormous challenge for the continent. Consistently high fertility rates are making it increasingly difficult to provide the up-and-coming generations with the bare essentials. Currently, 37 million children of primary school age in Africa cannot go to school and every year another five million children reach the age at which they should start school. Even if they do manage to complete their education, the next hurdle already awaits them: every year the 15–35 age group is growing by ten to twelve million people, while only about three million official jobs are being newly created on the entire continent.

This shows that most African states are trapped in a vicious circle of high population growth and persistent poverty. In order to escape this trap, fertility rates first need to fall. This would, on the one hand, reduce the pressure to provide for such a large number of people and, on the other, it would change the age structure of the population. Fewer children being born means that once the last big cohorts reach working age, a disproportionately large number of workers with only a small number of children and old people to provide for will be available to the economy. This “demographic bonus” can then be converted into a development boost, provided that young people can find employment. In the Asian tiger states a dynamic was thereby triggered that helped broad swathes of the population to achieve a higher standard of living. In other words, they reaped a demographic dividend.

Most countries in Africa are a long way from achieving an age structure that would yield a demographic bonus. Nevertheless, there are some that already have low fertility rates while others are currently experiencing a rapid decline in the number of children being born. The study “Africa’s Demographic Trailblazers: How Falling Fertility Rates Are Accelerating Development” examines seven of these countries and explains what circumstances have led directly or indirectly to a decline in fertility rates. The experiences of Tunisia, Morocco, Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal show that fertility rates decline if states manage to develop an effective overall concept that leads to progress in the areas of education, health and job creation. Better access to family planning methods and more equality between women and men are part of this overall package, too.

For those countries in Africa that are less advanced in their demographic development the experiences of these trailblazers offer important lessons for their own demographic policy. They can learn from these front-runners how to steer their demographic future and create the right conditions for socio-economic advancement. The international community should lend them targeted support in achieving progress in the central development areas of health, education and employment in order to stimulate the economy and bring about a decline in fertility rates.

It is also important to make the issue of population growth a stronger focus of foreign and development policy debates. “How many children people would like and actually have is a sensitive and very private matter”, says Reiner Klingholz, director of the Berlin Institute. “But at the point where it influences the development of whole states it becomes a social and political concern. To turn a blind eye to it will not help any of those involved, least of all the affected states themselves.”

The study recommends an open, clear and pragmatic discussion of the challenges associated with high population growth in order to identify means and possibilities to reduce it in a democratic and humane way. This is the basis for improving living conditions in the affected states. Germany, too, should contribute to making it acceptable to discuss the issue in an objective manner at international forums.

You can download the study free of charge as a PDF under:

<https://www.berlin-institut.org/en/publications/studies-in-english/africas-demographic-trailblazers>

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If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us:

Berlin Institute for Population and Development

Schillerstr. 59
10627 Berlin

Contacts: Alisa Kaps (kaps@berlin-institut.org, 030-31 01 68 35) and Reiner Klingholz (klingholz@berlin-institut.org, 030-31 01 75 60)

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