

DEMOGRAPHIC DYNAMICS AND SUSTAINABILITY IN AFRICA

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Summary

This paper explains the demographic dynamics in Africa and how they are related to sustainability. Sustainability involves a balance among economic and social development as well as environmental protection that is governed by an ethical dimension of justice and equity. Demography also includes statistics about people and encompasses births, death, diseases, migration and urbanization.

The current population growth of Africa combined with the unsustainable consumption patterns places severe stress on the life-support capacities of the continent. Economic and infrastructure development lags behind urban growth, thus resulting in chronic unemployment and lack of health, education, and other social amenities, which have adversely affected the standard of living and development, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The ultimate attainment of the objectives underlying the principles of sustainability lies in the absence of debilitating diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, water-borne diseases

and others. Special attention needs to be paid to inequalities in health, nutrition and education and early marriage and childbearing. And, finally, sufficient funding should be made available for policy-oriented research that focuses on critical environmental, social and economic problems, especially in countries where demographic pressure upon the natural resource base is increasing.

1. Introduction

Sustainability is a long-term goal over which there is broad and growing consensus. It entails the maintenance of a sustainable scale of the economy relative to its ecological life-support system and a fair distribution of resources and opportunities between present and future generations, as well as between agents in the current generation. It is about creating sustainable economies that equitably meet human needs without extracting resource inputs or expelling wastes in excess of the environment's regenerative capacity, and sustainable human institutions that assure both security and opportunity for social, intellectual, and spiritual growth. This paper attempts to examine whether Africa's demographic dynamics enhance or inhibit sustainability.

2. Demography

Demography encompasses vital statistics about people, such as births, deaths, diseases, migration, and urbanisation that help explain the condition of a community, country or region. The international community has over the years initiated and implemented programmes that aim at shaping demographic dynamics in a way that will help promote sustainable development. For instance, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994 served as a milestone in the history of population and development. ICPD gave a new, comprehensive approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights. The global community, for the first time ever, declared that people should choose their family size, in order to slow the rapid population growth that undermines poverty reduction efforts in the world's poorest countries.

The UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) held in Istanbul in 1996 addressed issues relating to the pressing problem of the rapid urbanisation of the world. Habitat II adopted a plan that provides an effective tool for creating sustainable human settlements for the next generation in the specific context of urbanisation. The Conference agreed to address many important issues concerning human settlements including unsustainable consumption and production patterns, unsustainable population changes, homelessness and unemployment. It also addressed the problems of the lack of basic infrastructure and services, growing insecurity and violence, and increased vulnerability to disasters. The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 further sensitised the world about the need to promote sustainable development. Both events reiterated that action for sustainable development requires a balance among economic development or material welfare, social development, and environmental protection, which should be governed by an ethical dimension of justice, now and for generations to come. Each society, nation or community must find its own unique balance among these dimensions, by applying the principles of a global vision of sustainability in ways and means appropriate to its own circumstances.

3. Population growth and structure

3.1. Global population trends

World population growth accelerated after World War II, when the population of less developed countries began to increase dramatically. A billion people were added to the world's population between 1960 and 1975; another billion were added between 1975 and 1987. Human population entered the twentieth century with 1.6 billion people and left the century with 6.1 billion.

Population growth and distribution differ significantly among the major regions. Asia, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean all increased their share of the world population between 1970 and 1998. Asia's share of world population rose from 58% to 61%, Africa from 10 to 13%, the Caribbean and Latin America from 8 to 9%. During the same period, the share of Northern America declined from 6% in 1950 to 5% in 1998, and Europe from 18% to 12% (Bureau of Census, 2000).

A growth rate of 1.4%, when applied to the world's population of 6.1 billion yields an annual increase of about 85 million people. Because of the large and increasing population size, the number of people added to the global population will remain high for several decades, even as growth rates continue to decline. Table 1 shows the growth of world population since 1900 and includes projections through to 2150. There has been more population growth since 1950 than during all the previous years of human existence.

Major Area	1900	1950	1999	2050	2150
World	1650	2521	5978	8909	9746
Africa	133	221	767	1766	2308
Asia	947	1402	3634	5268	5561
Europe	408	547	729	628	517
Latin America & Caribbean	74	167	511	809	912
North America	82	172	307	392	398
Oceania	6	13	30	46	51

Source: United Nations, 1992

Table 1. Population of the world and its major areas, 1900-2150

The unprecedented surge in population, combined with rising individual consumption, is pushing the planet beyond its carrying capacity. Water tables are falling on every continent as demand exceeds the sustainable yield of aquifers. According to Brown, Gardner, and Hawell (1998), the Earth's temperature is rising, promising changes in climate that cannot be anticipated. In their words, "we are triggering the greatest extinction of plant and animal species since the dinosaurs disappeared. As our numbers go up, their numbers go down".

3.2. Population growth in Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is reputed to experience the world's highest rate of natural increase in population, about 3% per year. Its population is projected to grow from about 700 million to 1.6 billion people by 2050. This large growth stems from the high total fertility rate (TFR) of about 6.0 children per woman, which is twice the world average. Table 2 is an illustration of percentage distribution of population change (1900-2150), comparing that of Africa with other regions, while Figure 1 shows the population density in Africa.

Major Area	1900	1950	1999	2050	2150
World	100	100	100	100	100
Africa	8.1	8.8	12.8	19.8	23.7
Asia	57.4	55.6	60.8	59.1	57.1
Europe	24.7	21.7	12.2	7.0	5.3
Latin America & Caribbean	4.5	6.6	8.5	9.1	9.3
North America	5.0	6.8	5.1	4.4	4.1
Oceania	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5

Source: United Nations, 1992

Table 2. Distribution of population of major areas of the world, 1900-2150



Average number of people per square mile

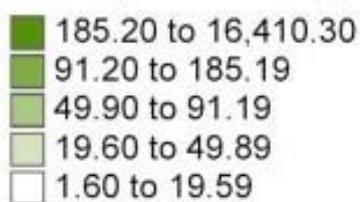


Figure 1. Map of Africa showing population density

Africa is the only region projected to have more than twice its current population size by 2050, increasing its share of the world's population to 20% (see Table 2). The continent's population will continue to grow exponentially if far-reaching measures are not adopted to reduce the current growth rate. Table 3 shows the birth rate (per 1000) from selected European and Africa countries. Whereas the lowest growth rate among the European countries (Germany) is 8.6 the lowest among the African countries (South Africa) is 18.87 per 1000. That of Tanzania, the highest among the African group (39.5) is more than 3 times that of the country (France) with the fastest growing rate (12.54) among the European countries.

Europe	France	12.54
	Germany	8.6
	United Kingdom	10.99
	Italy	9.18
Africa	South Africa	18.87
	Tanzania	39.5
	Algeria	21.94
	Nigeria	38.75

Source: CIA World Fact Book, December 2003

Table 3. Birth rates for selected European and African countries (per 1000)

West and Central Africa are experiencing a rapid annual population growth of between 2.7 and 2.9%, respectively (Bureau of Census, 2000). Other regions exhibit somewhat lower growth rates, but even the region with the lowest growth, Southern Africa, still experiences an annual growth rate of more than 1%.

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Kwame Ameyaw Domfeh, Ph.D. is a senior Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, University of Ghana Business School, Legon, Ghana. Until recently he was a Senior Lecturer and the Head of the Department of Public Administration and Health Services Management of the University of Ghana, where he was teaching since 1993. His teaching and research interests include environmental policy and politics, environmental problems in the Third World, sustainable cities, and urban governance.

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