

Reviewing the Narrative Concerning the Impact of Population Growth in Africa

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Abstract This article discusses the topic of population growth in Africa, a recurring theme in the era of climate change and the fight against CO₂ emissions. The African continent is full of essential raw materials and encompasses the youngest population in the world. There is no doubt concerning the significant role it will play in global affairs, at a time when the world population is ageing, according to the UN statistics. In recent years, many policymakers have highlighted the necessity to deal with overpopulation, provoking moral controversial and basic human rights abuses. This article, however, proposes an opposite argumentation based on fresh data and emphasises the opportunities and challenges to take on, as the author considers “overpopulation” as more of a challenge than a sentence to underdevelopment. Though the paper mentions different issues linked to overpopulation, such as migration crisis, ecological sustainability and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, it concludes with a reminder of the importance of international cooperation as a solution to global issues.

Keywords: • global issues • impact of population growth • migration trends • international cooperation • pollution • African Union • European Union • UN sustainable development goals • environmental footprint •

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1 Introduction

Among the challenges facing our modern society, one can mention overpopulation, ageing, migration crisis and climate change. Indeed, several UN reports, since the 1980s, had warned about the impact of the ageing of the world population, the rate of unemployment and the lack of adequate training in developing countries, especially in Africa whose population is rapidly growing. A huge growth with the authorities not reacting fast enough by improving health care facilities, educational and cultural infrastructures, puts in danger the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The debate on the growth of the world's population is not new. Many scientists, including *Thomas Malthus*, the most popular of those dealing with this topic, have predicted the negative effects that overpopulation can have on the planet's ecosystem. Others point out that one of the consequences of population growth is the increase in agricultural intensification to foster food production (Boserup, 2017: 53–55). It is worth mentioning here the notion of the Malthusian trap that most developing economies face. As an example, we can refer to the case of the East African countries, which have been struggling to regulate food production and the fast growth of the population (Korotayev, Zinkina, 2015: 385–420). The obligation to produce more to meet everybody's need, when the modernisation of agriculture has not been accomplished, has a terrible effect on populations and is likely to lead to the total breakdown of a state, as proved by *Catherine André* and *Jean-Philippe Platteau* (André, Platteau, 1998: 1–47). For all these reasons, many leaders, when talking about this topic, focus more on the issues than the opportunities. The Peruvian case is a perfect illustration, as in the mid-'90s, in a struggle to reduce the birth rate in the country, the authorities decided to sterilise more than 200,000 women, even if not all of them agreed or were aware of the campaign (Bergen, 2019).

Most of the time, economic reasons are misstated as an argument against demographic problems, given their impact on infrastructure, food, health and other needs. The author of this paper supports the hypothesis that population growth needs a more holistic approach, based not only on the economic aspect but on many other areas of life in society.

In this article, through an analytical methodology, we will compare the statistics of population ageing worldwide with growth in Africa, in an attempt to prove the link between both situations. We will then focus on unemployment and the environmental impact, which are some of the consequences of overpopulation. As a solution, we will propose the strengthening of international cooperation and a positive role the EU can play in this matter as one of the biggest investors and the closest neighbour of Africa.

2 Ageing vs population growth

Population growth has advantages and disadvantages and in a world threatened by ageing, global warming and endangered species, mostly due to human activities, the situation must be analysed in a comprehensive approach. To address the question: is population growth good or bad for economic development?¹ There can be multiple answers to this, as was well-argued by *Sean Fox* (Lecturer at the University of Bristol) and *Tim Dyson* (Professor of Population Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science). However, there is no doubt that among the challenges facing humanity, the ageing of the world's population stands out.

Ageing will influence all currently known sectors of activities, gradually transforming our different societies, causing a decline in competitiveness and a decrease in world production, thereby influencing development at a global level. Indeed, it is hard to imagine employees of a certain age doing physical tasks or working in demanding factories. The more the people age, the more they need healthcare assistance and do not want to work after a certain age. Surely it is for that reason the pension reforms that started in many developed countries have faced resistance. *Aw, Silva* and *Palmer* support the same argumentation in their article “emerging challenges for an ageing population” by pointing out that the innate and adaptive immune systems of elderly people suffer from age-dependent defects (*Aw, Silva, Palmer, 2007*).

¹ https://www.theigc.org/blog/is-population-growth-good-or-bad-for-economic-development/#_edn13 (accessed: 20. 5. 2019).

Moreover, in 2017, the Population Division of the UN predicted that the number of older people, about 60 years old or over, will more than double by 2050 and more than triple by 2100. A more alarming fact is that the population aged 60 or over is growing faster than all younger age groups, and this situation is likely to affect the already high demand for health care, pensions and social protection. Though the UN has been addressing the issue of ageing since the 80s, 1982 to be precise, we have to acknowledge that it continues to pose serious threats to different developed countries. Several actions were taken to overcome the problem very early, but nothing helped. One of those activities was the “Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing” which mainly focused on certain issues faced by the elderly: health and nutrition, protecting elderly consumers, employment, housing and environment. The General Assembly adopted in 1991 the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, enumerating 18 entitlements for older persons – relating to independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity.

Additionally, a Political Declaration and the Madrid International Plan of Action on ageing were adopted in 2002 to strengthen the legal instrument established to assist older people.² None of these mechanisms has slowed down the ageing of the population in a certain part of the globe; on the contrary, the situation is evolving. As an illustration, we can mention the low fertility rate in the European Union, which is even lower than the replacement rate. In similar cases, immigration is a necessity to sustain the economy and other social life activities.

Based on the data mentioned above, it can be concluded that the young population of developing countries has a salutary role to play. Indeed, according to the latest estimation of the UN, the median age in Africa is estimated at 19.4 years. It appears clear that only this youth can stabilise the actual ageing demographic curve witnessed in the UN statistics, which is necessary to ensure continuous growth and development on a global scale.

² DESA United Nations Programme on Ageing, World Population Ageing Report: World Population Prospects: the 2017 Revision <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/ageing/> (accessed : 21. 5. 2019).

3 Population growth and unemployment

It is a fact that 41% of the African population is urban, and this number is set to grow, raising (un)employment and livelihood issues. This situation, however, is not limited to Africa alone, as the International Labour Organization stated in its report.³ The “World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2018” noticed a high rate of unemployment and decent work deficits worldwide. Despite the improvements in developing countries and a positive trend, reducing the global unemployment rate from 5.6% in 2017 to 5.5% in 2018, the growth is not good enough to stimulate new jobs. Statistics provided by ILO showed that the lack of occupation is recurrent not only in the populated areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, which has a 7.2 per cent rate of unemployment. The highest rate on the continent has been noticed in Northern Africa, whereas on a global scale, in Central and Western Asia, the unemployment rate is expected to remain at around 8.6% throughout 2018 and 2019. The situation was also critical in Northern, Southern and Western Europe with 9.2% of unemployment in 2016 to 8.5% in 2017 and a bit lower through 2018 and 2019.

On the African market, steady growth was possible thanks to the strong performance of emerging economies, such as Nigeria, South Africa or Angola. However, their recent decrease in the rate of growth did not spoil regional progress because other countries took the lead and ensured sustained growth. The World Bank, in the account for the year 2019, projected a GDP growth rate of 3.4% in sub-Saharan Africa, supported by growing markets such as Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, and Uganda, all predicted with a growth of over 6% from 2.7% in 2018 to a predicted⁴ 3.7% in 2020-21.

Furthermore, this prediction has been positively improved by another bank, this time the African Development Bank⁵, which in its new African Economic Outlook 2019 has highlighted the good financial health of the continent, with improved GDP statistics. According to the prognosis, the gross domestic product

³ [https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2018/WCMS_615594/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2018/WCMS_615594/lang-en/index.htm) (accessed: 20. 5. 2019).

⁴ The World Bank, Annual Global Economic Prospects report for sub-Saharan Africa, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects> (accessed: 20. 5. 2019).

⁵ African Development Bank, African Economic Outlook 2019: Macroeconomic performance and prospects Jobs, growth, and firm dynamism Integration for Africa’s economic prosperity.

(GDP) is expected to accelerate to 4.0% in 2019 and reach 4.1% in 2020. The report covers all countries and notes, however, that even if the African economic performance is positive, it is not enough to stem all social crises, causes of illegal migration, brain drain and other issues facing the continent.

To sum up, we can state that with a sustained effort and higher growths in the coming years, decent job creation will be a reality, thereby stemming the recurring problem of unemployment, wrongly linked to the demographic boom.

A direct negative link between unemployment and population growth cannot be established here as countries with low demographic growth are facing similar employment issues. This situation can be changed, however, according to a new 2018 report: “The Future of Work: Regional Perspectives by the African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and Inter-American Development Bank”. The document highlights the leading role yet to be played by new technologies to help and sustain the growth in developing countries. The paper mentions that it is the best way to achieve productivity and create new jobs. Technological evolution is an important weapon; the only one that can help yield advantages and opportunities presented in developing countries.

Nevertheless, this solution also has a disadvantage, as mentioned by *Carl Benedikt Frey* and *Michael A. Osborne* in their work “The future of employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation?” They stated that new technologies will enable the creation of enormous wealth, new jobs, new opportunities that did not exist before, but will cause undesired disruptions as well (Frey, Osborne, 2017). *Copley* of the Brookings Institution came to the same conclusion (Copley, 2018) when she noted in her work that high technological performance also means that many workers will not be needed for some tasks and might have to adapt to the newer approaches for success in the labour market. In that case, good governance and strategic planning are no longer a matter of choice, but a necessity, if developing countries are to minimise the disadvantage of new technologies and maximise new possibilities for development and economic growth. Overall, we can state that unemployment is not solely present in countries with demographic issues. Though the lack of proper infrastructure and investment has a significant influence on the subject,

we have highlighted the important role to be played by new technologies and good governance to foster job creation.

4 Population growth and Environmental footprint

The data from the World Bank⁶ (fertility rate, total (births per woman)) says that the world's highest fertility rate is in Africa. Naturally, the question of food sufficiency arises when we know that extensive agriculture can weaken the soil and have negative impacts on the environment, threatening food security. In the era of climate change, which does not help the situation and the scarcity of water in some areas, the question that comes to mind is the environmental footprint of Africa's overcrowded cities. According to the latest estimation of the UN, as of Monday, May 20th 2019, the current population of Africa is 1,315,995,255.⁷ Africa's population is equivalent to 16.64% of the total world population, the second most populated region on Earth after Asia, but according to our research, the pollution rate in African cities is less than in most European agglomerations. The CO₂ emissions (metric tons per capita) dating from 2014 and published by the World bank, mentioned the low emissions rate of African countries compared to developed countries. It is near 0 for most countries, 0.0 in Burundi for example, 0.1 in the Central African Republic and Chad, 0.3 metric tons per capita in Gambia and Kenya, 0.5 metric tons per capita in Nigeria despite its production and export activities of oil and gas. Overall, the least developed countries have 0.3 metric tons per capita of CO₂, Sub-Saharan Africa, 0.8 metric tons per capita, while North America has 16.4 metric tons per capita and the EU 6.4. It is obvious that what matters is not the number of people living in a country, but their real impact on the planet's limited resources. The developing countries, even though they have more resources and raw materials, consume less than western countries - thus emitting less CO₂. As the climate change will spare no continent, it is, therefore, very important to highlight the necessity of preparation and assistance needed to face environmental challenges, apart from the existing challenges such as massive urbanisation.

⁶ https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?name_desc=false (accessed: 5. 6. 2019).

⁷ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population> (accessed: 20. 5. 2019).

The world's urban area statistics prediction is set to increase to 90% of urbanisation until the year 2050. If these predictions become a reality, it will have a major impact on life in cities and might threaten sustainable development.

Without a doubt, we can mention that in the future, new technologies could shift the employment paradigm, forcing a shutdown of some jobs while fostering others. There is no doubt that the future of traditional agricultural jobs is not ensured, as rural areas will be either depleted due to the massive exploitation or purely abandoned for better job opportunities in the cities. To the question: who will feed the urban population if rural areas are empty? We can mention the options of urban agriculture and change in the way we perceive food and consumption. As the population growth in the future is certain, world employment reports tend to tell us that service sector jobs will play the leading role in employment prospectus, whereas manufacturing and agriculture will decline. Though this statement seems logical, it is important to highlight that agriculture has to be adapted and evolved as well, using all the necessary tools provided by numeric technologies and limiting pollution.

5 Importance of the Partnership with the EU

Apart from the colonial past and the various relations between the countries, the Europe-Africa partnership is very important. Misunderstanding the demographic challenge facing Africa, in a situation of climate change, frequent drought, deforestation, growing energy needs, the lack of infrastructure, etc... would be fatal to Europe. For that reason, in recent years, the European Union has devoted a lot of activities to Africa in its agenda. Already in November 2015, the migration crisis has favoured the Valletta Conference, in which European and African leaders have led to the creation by the EU of an emergency trust fund to promote development in Africa and, in return, to the assistance provided by African countries to mitigate the migration crisis. Several summits followed: the 5th AU-EU Summit Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire 29th-30th November 2017, Marrakech 28th and 29th November 2019, and several high-level meetings were organised to draft a better development strategy for both partners. In the preceding paragraphs, we have mentioned how the young population in Africa is an opportunity for its development and a chance to sustain the world's ageing population. Europe is one the continents in a constant need of qualified

workforce, and with its population ageing, Africa is more than ever a very good partner to invest in. From that perspective, population growth cannot be seen as a problem, but an opportunity for both sides, if certain prerequisites are met.

The European Union is one of Africa's leading economic partners. The two continents, the oldest and the youngest, have a common history and this should continue in the future, through a win-win partnership. To ignore such cooperation and opportunities on both sides of the Mediterranean would not be wise. It is for this reason that the Cotonou Agreement between the European Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP), signed on the 23rd of June 2000 in the Republic of Benin, constitutes a legal basis for the North-South partnership. This agreement, which expires in 2020 (20 years but revised in 2005 in Luxembourg and 2010 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso), is the legal basis for exchanges and partnerships between the EU and Africa. Added to this is the Africa-EU Partnership, which is consolidated by the Joint Africa-EU Strategy adopted in Lisbon in 2007. These agreements and formal framework for a dialogue between both continents, only separated by 14 km, make perfect sense, as the European Union is one of the leading business partners of Africa. It trades with 36% of Africa's goods, the worth of which is €243.5 billion. It is the first export market for Africa and one of the biggest investor with a stock of €291 billion in 2016, and a future investment plan estimated at €44 billion by 2020.

These investment funds, which are used to finance the EU's economic activities in Africa, will be revised upwards since several states that had not developed strong trade relations with African countries are improving their bilateral cooperations. It must be said that the migration crisis of 2015, as mentioned earlier, has traumatized European public opinion and has served as a fertilizer for the rise of anti-migration movements and far-right parties. In fact, the unprecedented migratory crisis of 2015, that caused huge losses of life in the Mediterranean (Mensah, 2017) and human trafficking in Libya, in particular, was mainly due to the youth unemployment and extreme poverty. For that reason, several projects have been put in place to promote the development of the private sector through substantial investments, thus guaranteeing future job creation. The new EU-Africa alliance launched by the European Union Commission will help the direct creation of 10 million jobs in Africa in the next

five 5 years.⁸ Job creation and solid economic growth is the only way to limit illegal migrations and brain drain. President John Dramani Mahama, former president of Ghana, during an address to a select Committee of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, has mentioned that building a strong economy can provide decent jobs for the country's youth and accelerate the economic growth. He believed that the expansion of the manufacturing sector and agriculture is the key to empowering the youth in Africa, and this would prevent them from embarking on deadly expeditions to Europe to seek greener pastures.⁹ This statement is even more important in light of the sustainable development goals that must be achieved at any cost. Even though the sustainable development goals include the migration in the mainstream global development policy, rectifying the omission made earlier in the Millennium Development Goals, it is important to mention that cross-border movements are sometimes provoked by the European companies developing business activities in Africa.

The consequence of the exploitation of mineral resources, mainly oil and gas, in certain regions is the recurrent pollution of watercourses. In the Niger Delta, people flee because their land has been polluted by mineral activities¹⁰. It is necessary to mention that many European companies are in charge of mining business activities in Africa and the partnership towards the realisation of the SDG must be respected by all, even if those companies represent one of Africa's biggest investors, namely the EU (Berman, Couttenier, Rohner, Thoenig, 2017). The abuses committed by several multinationals during the extraction of raw materials in Africa have been investigated by the UNEP in a report on Ogoniland, Nigeria. The results mentioned a high rate of pollution in the Niger Delta, for example, a region sadly known for pollution caused by big European companies like SHELL, after more than 50 years of operation.¹¹

⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/50509/new-africa-europe-alliance-brings-partnership-next-level_hr (accessed: 21. 5. 2019).

⁹ <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/We-II-create-jobs-to-curtail-youth-migration-Mahama-424516#>, (accessed: 21. 5. 2019).

¹⁰ <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/disasters-conflicts/where-we-work/nigeria/environmental-assessment-ogoniland-report> (accessed: 21. 5. 2019).

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme, <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/unep-ogoniland-oil-assessment-reveals-extent-environmental-contamination-and> (accessed: 21. 5. 2019).

To produce this report, it took an unprecedented assessment that lasted nearly 14 months and showed the scale of the disaster. More than 200 sites were studied, 122 km of pipeline rights-of-way reviewed, more than 5,000 health records were examined, and more than 23,000 people were invited to attend local community meetings.

According to the assessment, public health is seriously endangered in at least 10 Ogoni communities where drinking water is contaminated by high levels of hydrocarbons. This favours migrations to other arable lands where water would be available.

To sum up, it can be noted that strengthening the existing North-South cooperation and monitoring the economic activities of the European partners is a plausible solution to address modern challenges.

6 Conclusion

Africa has 60% of the world's uncultivated land, according to the World Bank estimation. There are enough land and resources to feed the growing population and export goods as well.¹² The modernisation of agriculture and access to new technologies added to high economic growth, while an educated youth can be the solution to development. Moreover, strengthening the links within African countries and with Western economic partners is one of the best solutions to deal with issues in modern times. With the help of financial partners, the future can surely be either bright or disastrous if the challenge of population growth is not wisely managed and seriously analysed, taking into account the present world situations. To this end, several meetings and conferences, subsidised by the EU Commission and its partners, are organised 'in Europe and Africa', with the private sector and governments. For instance, Germany, which had been very discreet with its investments in Africa, is catching up with several high-profile activities.¹³ Many other countries are doing the same by intensifying

¹² <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/january-2013/china-heart-africa> (accessed: 5. 6. 2019).

¹³ The 3rd German-African Economic Summit was held in Accra, Ghana to promote investment by German companies in this promising continent. <https://www.dw.com/fr/berlin-veut-booster-les-investissements-allemands-en-afrique/a-47540189> (accessed: 22. 5. 2019)

their economic, diplomatic and cultural relations with their African partners.¹⁴ The purpose of these manoeuvres is to achieve sustainable development for all in the context of global interdependence.

In this article, we have highlighted the challenges that need to be addressed because a failure to meet these goals will not benefit anyone. Social challenges, such as ageing, demographic growth or climate change, are universal and affect all nations. Better cooperation is needed because the failure or the bankruptcy of a partner will jeopardise the future of the others.

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¹⁴ During the 8th AFRICA DAY conference organised in Ljubljana (15–16. 5. 2019), Slovenia has signed different cooperation agreements with Ghana, including the offering of scholarships to students, and will promote business and academic mobility.

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