Report:
Towards demographic dividends in Africa: action and investments

Monday 21 – Wednesday 23 July 2025

In association with
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This report is based on discussions at the Wilton Park high-level roundtable, Towards demographic dividends in Africa: action and investments, that took place from Monday 21 – Wednesday 23 July 2025.

Contents

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa[1] (SSA) is undergoing a profound demographic transformation. The region's population, currently estimated at 1.2 billion, is projected to reach approximately 2.1 billion by 2050, accounting for over 20% of the global population. Notably, by 2040, SSA will have the world's largest population of individuals under the age of 25, due to a slower decline in fertility rates compared to the more rapid decline in mortality rates. These demographic trends carry significant implications, not only for the continent but for global development as well.

In response to these trends, the use of demographic data and evidence is increasingly relevant in planning, policy and investment decisions. Understanding how population trends are likely to unfold in the short, medium and long term is critical for achieving a more inclusive, prosperous and sustainable future.

Demography is particularly relevant for two areas. Firstly, without proactive planning and investment, continued rapid population growth risks outpacing development efforts. Secondly, proactive planning and investment are required to draw benefit from future opportunities, such as when population structures shift towards lower dependency rates, creating a window of opportunity for SSA's further development. It is therefore essential that governments across SSA, the private sector, and international partners work together to create systems and tools that can support forward-looking policy design and implementation that accommodate demographic shifts, supported by the committed leadership necessary to make this happen. This is particularly relevant for SSA's investments in human capital and labour market structures. Better skilled and higher educated youth can be associated with social shifts and economic opportunities, but if the labour market is unable to absorb young new workers in productive activities, demographic potential will not be harnessed. Decisions now on planning, policy, and investments will have tremendous developmental impacts for the future, particularly for fulfilling the potentials of SSA's youthful population.

[1] The World Bank defines Sub-Saharan Africa as comprising the following countries: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, The Republic of the Congo, Cote D'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. [Sub-Saharan Africa | Data]

Building on the momentum of the 2023 Heads of State Human Capital Summit convened by the World Bank in Tanzania, this Wilton Park roundtable examined how demographic evidence and data can be embedded in different policy areas. This roundtable offered regional governments, researchers, private sector representatives and other experts a platform to exchange insights, share evidence, and collaboratively develop strategies on pathways to respond to challenges and opportunities.

Demographic trends and why they matter

SSA is experiencing a significant demographic change. The UN World Population Prospects (2024 revision) projects that the population in SSA is expected to continue to grow from about 1.3 billion today to 2.1 billion by 2050, and to 3.3 billion in 2100. Future population trends are uncertain with a 95% projection interval between 2.7 billion and 4.5 billion in 2100. However, the prospect for SSA is rapid population growth and a youthful population, because fertility rates are declining slowly. Due to shifts in fertility and mortality rates, the age structure of the total population is projected to change as follows:[2]

- The under-15 age group is projected to continue its declining share of the total population—from 44% in 2000 to 40% today, and further down to 33% by 2050. However, its absolute number will still increase by 35% between 2025 and 2050, due to continued high fertility rates and population momentum.
- The 15–59 age group is expected to grow its share of the total population from 51% in 2000 to 55% today to reach 60% by 2050. The size of this group will expand by 82% between 2025 and 2050.
- The 60+ age group remains relatively small but is projected to increase its share of the population from just under 5% today to 8% by 2050. Notably, this is the only age group with a higher growth rate between 2025 and 2050 than in the previous period (2000–2025), with numbers more than doubling between 2025-2050.

The small decline in the proportion of the population under the age of 15 in SSA is largely the result of declining fertility rates, albeit slower declines and later initiated than those observed in other regions. Forty-two countries in the region still have a total fertility rate (TFR) above 4 births per woman, and several, including Niger, the Central

[2] The UN World Population Prospects, 2024 Revision, demographic profiles: World Population Prospects

African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, and Somalia, have TFRs exceeding 6.

Notable exceptions include Kenya (3.3 births per woman), Ghana (3.5), Gabon (3.8), Rwanda (3.8), and Ethiopia (4.2), which have all experienced faster fertility declines in recent years compared to the majority of countries in SSA. For those countries that experience rapid fertility declines, the share of the working-age population (15–59 years) increases, which means that the child dependency ratio (under 15) gradually falls. However, for the majority of countries experiencing slower declines in fertility, there are smaller impacts on the dependency ratio. Where achieving a more rapid decline in fertility, including ending child marriage, and addressing human development, particularly girls' education, are not prioritised, even very careful planning and investments would have little effect on economic prospects.

Declining mortality rates (including child mortality) and related extended life expectancy rates for both men and women across SSA (51 in 2000, 62 now, 67 in 2050) are contributing to growth in the 60+ age group. While this older population segment remains relatively small, its expansion marks the beginnings of a shift in dependency burdens from youth to the elderly, which will become more apparent towards the end of the century. Lower fertility and mortality rates are features of the end of the demographic transition.

There are significant regional differences. For example, Southern Africa began experiencing fertility declines as early as the 1950s and now has the lowest TFR of all SSA regions. Central Africa started its transition later, in the 1990s. There are also country-specific patterns that need to be understood as countries and intra-country disparities need to also be recognised. Landlocked Sahel countries have the world's highest fertility rates and face steep challenges in supporting rapidly growing populations. Niger, for example, is projected to grow from 28 million in 2025 to 70 million by 2050. This surge will likely heighten regional tensions and drive intra-African migration toward coastal West African states, where fertility rates are slightly lower but populations are still rising and may already be experiencing challenges. Managing these migration flows without triggering social tensions or conflict will be a critical challenge for the region.

Fertility inequality is persistent in countries, particularly between more educated women and less-educated populations. There have been some declines in adolescent (aged 15-19) childbearing, with large declines in countries like Ethiopia and Kenya.

However, the rate (average of 10% adolescent childbearing per 1000 births in SSA) is still far higher than in other parts of the world. If adolescent birth rates declined quickly (20% annual reductions), the number of births in SSA would stabilise and would be 20% smaller than what is currently projected in 2050.

These demographic trends present a particularly complex policy challenge and show why demographic evidence and data is important for planning, policy and investments. For those countries that experience faster demographic transitions that lead to lower dependency ratios and higher working-age populations, economic opportunities can be generated provided health, education, and labour markets are significantly scaled up. Rapid population growth means that maintaining current per capita investment will require sustained annual budget increases, which for example will include spending on more trained teachers, nurses, and doctors. Rapid population growth also increases food security challenges. Yet current spending already falls below international benchmarks, and overseas development assistance (ODA) is declining. Ignoring demographic evidence risks further straining service quality and coverage.

SSA needs to integrate 20 million new labour market entrants annually, but only about 25% of these entrants secure formal employment; most find work in low-paid, insecure informal jobs. Policymakers face the challenge of maximising the potential of each new generation, requiring major public and private investment in human capital and measures to boost labour demand. If fertility declines accelerate, the age-structure would shift towards a greater working-age population. With fewer children to support, working-age adults can save more, and families can invest more in each child's education, health, and wellbeing. This investment, alongside investments in an enabling economic environment, can yield better educational outcomes, improved nutrition, and increased labour market participation for women, as well as enhanced national productivity, economic growth, food security, and stability.

Private sector involvement

To capitalise on this opportunity there are several promising areas for private sector development in SSA, each presenting unique opportunities, but also challenges. Success in these sectors depends on targeted planning, supportive policy frameworks, and substantial investment over a long-time span, that need to be tailored and sequenced through demographic evidence and data.

Areas for private sector development	
Areas	**Development potential**
Agrifood sector	Traditionally the main employer in SSA, especially in smallholder farming. Commercialisation and productivity gains could raise incomes through on- and off-farm activities like processing and trading. However, even with higher productivity, agrifood alone cannot absorb the growing labour force.
Manufacturing	In Asia, labour-intensive industries such as garments have driven economic transformation and absorbed large numbers of workers, including women. SSA could attract manufacturing investment, but rapid capital-intensive shifts in the sector, combined with limited infrastructure in SSA, make replicating Asia's path uncertain.
Services	SSA could leapfrog into tradable services like call centres, tourism, software, and creative industries. Realising this potential requires reliable infrastructure—especially power and internet—and a better-educated youth, demanding substantial public and private investment.
Digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI)	Digital technologies and the rise of AI offer significant opportunities for innovation and economic growth in SSA. Major challenges to realising the potential of digital technologies must be addressed, including in energy infrastructure, foundational skills, connectivity, and access to devices. Demography can help to understand future trajectories of who benefits from technology and AI and who does not.

Private and public investments are required, but currently, high public debt, borrowing costs, and low domestic savings, exacerbated by high fertility rates, limit investment capacity. Responding to these opportunities and challenges requires a good understanding of the demographic trends that may shift spending priorities.

Finally, a shift in age-structure towards a working age population alongside an aging population will ultimately create the opportunity to set-up a viable social protection system (e.g. pensions and other savings). This shift will also offer an opportunity to develop domestic care economies. In SSA, women often bear the dual burden of caring for children and aging parents, limiting formal workforce participation during their most productive years. Expanding paid and skilled care jobs could create employment, ease unpaid caregiving burdens, and boost women's economic participation. Without such systems, and without viable savings, women face reduced earning and saving potential, deepening long-term economic vulnerability.

Linking demography and policy

Demographic evidence and projections hold substantial potential to support policymakers in SSA in making informed, forward-looking decisions that address critical development challenges while efficiently leveraging emerging opportunities. Crucially transformative growth that accommodates SSA country population shifts will only be achieved through long-term planning and evidence-based policy.

The decisions taken today are not only vital for SSA's development trajectory but have global implications, impacting trade, geopolitics, migration patterns, and even cultural dynamics, such as fashion trends. Demography, therefore, presents a unique opportunity to align and connect multisectoral stakeholders across global, regional, national, and local levels, while also facilitating interdisciplinary knowledge exchange.

However, demographic considerations remain underrepresented in major policy discussions, where growth strategies often prioritise gross domestic product (GDP) expansion with the assumption that fertility declines will follow automatically. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, demographic issues had gained prominence, largely due to the African Union's (AU) leadership in encouraging member states to harness the demographic dividend through investments in youth. This was built on a 2017 roadmap aligned with Agenda 2063[3], the AU's 50-year vision for socioeconomic

[3] The AU's Agenda 2063: 36204-doc-agenda2063_popular_version_en.pdf; The AU's 2017 Roadmap on Demographic Dividend: AU 2017 DD ROADMAP Final - EN_2.pdf

transformation. The AU's approach emphasised investment across four strategic pillars:

- Employment and entrepreneurship: Promoting job creation and youth-led enterprise development.
- Education and skills development: Improving access to quality education and training aligned with labour market needs.
- Health and wellbeing: Investing in healthcare, particularly sexual and reproductive health, to ensure a healthy, productive youth population.
- Rights, governance, and youth empowerment: Supporting youth participation in governance and decision-making and protecting their rights.

The 2017 AU theme underscored the need to translate demographic potential into a skilled and empowered workforce. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic diverted attention, and demography has since receded from the top of political agendas in many SSA countries.

This concern was echoed during the Wilton Park roundtable, where participants expressed a desire to reinvigorate the demographic discourse and link it more effectively to economic development, for example through renewed public finance management strategies. This requires governments to prioritise within constrained budgets, making difficult but essential long-term investment choices. Importantly, budget planning must be strategic, sequenced, and anchored in robust demographic evidence. However, budget allocations are inherently political. In many SSA countries, ethnic (and increasingly religious) politics dominate the allocation of public funds, with political incentives often tied to population size. As a result, each decision carries opportunity costs that must be recognised and addressed when advocating for change.

Policy area examples

At Wilton Park, four policy areas were highlighted where demography can provide an essential lens to guide strategic investment and policymaking:

Policy areas	
Inclusive growth	GDP growth must be more equitable, benefiting a wider share of the population to build a sustainable African middle class. Demographic data is essential for identifying where

Policy areas	
	and how to direct investments. This requires independent institutions, operating outside direct political control, to ensure transparency and accountability in decision-making.
Employment	Labour market reforms must align with demographic trends and business needs. Job creation for growing working age populations will require improving foundational education, vocational and skills training, expanding small business access to finance, and potentially providing incentives for private sector job creation, especially for youth. Reliable demographic data is foundational to these decisions.
Environment and climate change	Environment and Climate Change: effectively addressing the impacts of climate change on populations is urgent, and will help to generate benefits from demography-linked policies. This demands integrated analysis of demographic and climate data, focusing on adaptation strategies, pragmatic interventions, and the scaling of successful local, low-carbon solutions.
Conflict and governance	To reduce tensions and mitigate potential conflict, demographic evidence and projections (including migration data) must be used to understand and respond to the needs of growing youth populations. This includes communicating findings in accessible ways, improving trust, and engaging both national and traditional leaders. Strengthening coordination and promoting mutual learning are key to success in this area.

These four themes do not exclude other areas where demographic data should inform policy. For SSA to adapt to a rapidly growing population and benefit from its demographic trends, planning and investments must also address urbanisation strategies and policies, tax and fiscal policies, social protection systems, migration policy, entrepreneurship and SME support, regional trade (e.g. African Continental

Free Trade Area), food security and nutrition policies, and investments in human capital development and infrastructure.

Despite the urgency, short political cycles often undermine the continuity required for long-term demographic planning. Furthermore, the current global financial conditions are unfavourable for many African countries, resulting in high interest rates and low foreign investments. However, not all impactful changes require large investments. For example, improving girls' access to secondary education can lead to reduced early marriage, better maternal and child health outcomes and lower fertility rates. Similarly, easing market constraints for small businesses (particularly for female-led businesses that face unfair constraints due to gender norms and fewer assets) through improving access to finance, registration and compliance with quality standards can improve business performance, increase innovations, help increase household savings and long-term investments in children's futures.

The World Bank has promoted the concept of *dynamic demography* for a flexible approach to policy, investment, and budget planning that evolves in tandem with population dynamics. For instance, pension age policies must be adjusted over time to reflect changing life expectancy and dependency ratios. Similarly, investments in education infrastructure must be informed by projected enrolment needs and workforce requirements. This requires responsive fiscal rules and responsive governance structures. Effective policies and budget reforms, grounded in demographic evidence, can unlock additional investment flows and build trust among international partners. However, these efforts must be backed by clear action pathways and long-term investment strategies.

Strengthening the use of demographic data

High-quality demographic data is critical for understanding population dynamics and planning effectively for the future. It provides detailed insights into population size, age structure, geographic distribution, socioeconomic status, and other key indicators such as fertility, mortality, and migration. When disaggregated by characteristics such as age, sex, education, marital status, or income, demographic data becomes a powerful tool for shaping responsive, inclusive, and forward-looking policy.

This data underpins governments' ability to plan for essential public services, including health, education, food systems, infrastructure, and job creation. It also plays a pivotal role in forecasting demographic shifts, preparing for climate change impacts, and ensuring effective social protection systems.

However, across SSA, the systems for collecting, storing, and analysing demographic data remain fragmented, outdated, or underfunded. To address this, a coordinated, long-term effort is needed to strengthen national data ecosystems. This effort should focus on improving the quality, accessibility, and usability of data while ensuring inclusivity and sustainability. However, there are several challenges to be addressed:

- Censuses provide comprehensive data but are costly, conducted infrequently (typically every 10 years), and often miss the impact of sudden events like conflict or natural disasters.
- Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems, which are essential for tracking births, deaths, marriages, and divorces, are incomplete in most SSA countries. They lack coverage and rarely include migration or socioeconomic data.
- Household surveys, such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), offer rich insights but have limitations due to sample size constraints, non-response bias, and outdated sampling frames. Many are donor-funded and vulnerable to shifting financial priorities. The DHS was financed by USAID, but finding alternative funding is uncertain, with fears that other donors and African governments will not be able to continue these vital surveys and other support for demographic data collection.
- Digital and innovative data tools, including satellite imagery, mobile data collection, biometrics, and geospatial mapping, hold great promise but require institutional capacity, user literacy, and policy frameworks to be effective and equitable.

To strengthen demographic data systems and ensure their relevance and impact, the following actions should be prioritised:

1. Build capacity for data use at all levels

- Promote awareness of the value of demographic data among policymakers, at senior national and state/local government levels.
- Provide targeted training and skills development to improve data literacy among planners, administrators, and media.
- Use real-world case studies to demonstrate how demographic data informs effective policy and planning.

2 Modernise and integrate data collection systems

- Support the development of national roadmaps for integrated data systems that include censuses, CRVS, household surveys, and new technologies.
- Expand and digitise CRVS systems to ensure complete and real-time coverage of vital events.
- Use innovative new ways, such as geospatial technologies and satellite imagery to enhance population estimates and support planning.

3 Improve data quality, comparability, and frequency

- Ensure that data systems generate regular, up-to-date, and disaggregated data to reflect rapid demographic change.
- Establish clear protocols for data validation, editing, anonymisation, and quality assurance, including regular audits and supervision.

4 Enhance data accessibility and communication

- Make data open, user-friendly, and accessible through national portals and interactive platforms.
- Use infographics, dashboards, and downloadable datasets to increase visibility and utility.
- Strengthen media capacity to interpret and report on demographic data in ways that hold governments accountable and combat misinformation.

5 Ensure inclusion and equity in data systems

- Prioritise the inclusion of marginalised populations, such as nomadic groups, informal settlements, people with disabilities, and linguistic minorities.
- Design surveys and digital tools that accommodate diverse user needs and reduce barriers to participation.

6 Secure sustainable financing and ownership

- Mobilise domestic resources and political commitment to fund core data systems over the long term.
- Reduce reliance on donor funding by embedding demographic data priorities in national development plans and budgets.

Demographic data should be seen as a strategic asset. Strengthening national systems for its collection, storage, and use is essential for evidence-based governance and sustainable development. As populations in SSA continue to grow and change, governments must act now to ensure that data systems are fit for purpose: accurate, inclusive, timely, and actionable.

Political awareness, commitment and leadership

Sustained socio-economic transformation in SSA requires high-level government ownership and leadership. Without political commitment, comprehensive policy design and implementation built on demographic evidence and data falters. Several interlinked factors influence the degree to which political leaders prioritise demographic evidence for policies:

- Social and religious sensitivities: Political leaders often navigate complex relationships with religious and conservative groups. For example, this may impede the expansion of voluntary modern family planning services. Even when national leaders privately support fertility reduction, they may hesitate to act publicly for fear of losing political support.
- Lack of perceived public demand: In fragile or resource-constrained settings, governments may focus on visible infrastructure projects rather than investing in policies like girls' education or women's empowerment, often perceived as lower political priorities.
- Population as a strategic asset: Some leaders view large populations as a source of economic or political strength, and may argue that economic growth, rather than fertility reduction, should be the main pathway to demographic change.

Growing recognition of the importance of demographic evidence advocated by institutions such as the AU has influenced political attitudes. At the same time, young people across the continent are increasingly vocal about their unmet needs for health services, education, and employment, signalling a shift in public expectations and political pressure.

For better policy outcomes, governments will need to use demographic evidence for strategic and comprehensive policies backed by coordinated leadership at multiple levels of government. Options for action include:

1 Secure high-level political leadership

- Commitment must come from the top: the president, prime minister, and ministers of finance and planning must endorse and champion population-related goals.
- Ministries of health, education, gender, trade, and labour must be actively engaged in implementation and intersectoral coordination.

2 Institutionalise demographic policy frameworks

- Develop and adopt comprehensive policies, based on demographic evidence related to youth, urbanisation, fertility, ageing and migration.
- Ensure these policies include clear goals, timelines, indicators, and accountability mechanisms.
- Clear strategies and roadmaps based on the work of the AU.

3 Enact supportive laws and regulations

- Reform or eliminate restrictive policies, such as spousal consent for contraception or age limits on access, that hinder reproductive autonomy.
- Establish laws to prevent child marriage and guarantee equal access to education for girls.
- Reform market access for small businesses to make registration of business more attractive.
- Ensure regulations support the financing and quality control of interventions and services.

4 Engage legislatures and political champions

- Parliamentary committees and influential lawmakers can push for sustained demographic investment and hold governments accountable.
- Building political champions at both national and subnational levels helps maintain visibility and momentum for policy implementation.

5 Ensure budget allocations reflect regional needs and equitable access to services and information

- Demographic data helps identify population hotspots, such as rapidly growing urban areas or underserved rural regions, so that budgets can be directed where demand for services is greatest.

- Evidence on population age, gender, and geographic distribution ensures that investments in health, education, and infrastructure reach marginalised groups and reduce regional disparities.
- With constrained public budgets, demographic evidence prevents waste by aligning spending with actual population needs, improving value for money.
- Demographic projections allow governments to plan for upcoming pressures, such as school enrolments, healthcare staffing, or pension systems, before gaps emerge.
- Transparent use of demographic data in budgeting builds public trust and supports monitoring of whether investments are delivering equitable outcomes.

6 Strengthen subnational leadership and delivery

- Decentralisation of decision-making and programme delivery is key to tailoring interventions and services to local needs and realities.
- Provincial and local governments need the authority, resources, and incentives to implement policies based on demographic evidence more effectively.
- Embedding officers in local development committees with specific tasks and responsibilities while encouraging collaboration with youth, civil society, and private actors to drive responsive and participatory planning.

As such, transforming demographic opportunity into economic and social development requires political vision, leadership, and accountability. Strategic decisions need to be made based on evidence, which means clear and open discussions on prioritisations of certain policies, programmes or investments following a timeline. However, such political commitment in the longer term might be difficult, given short-term decision-making horizons resulting from four or five-year electoral cycles.

Importantly, policies, programmes, investments and other interventions must be planned and designed through a multisectoral lens, grounded in demographic evidence, and implemented in a coordinated, inclusive, and sustainable manner. Key policy areas that need to be aligned with each other are related to voluntary family planning, healthcare, education (e.g. girls' education), women's empowerment (e.g. economic empowerment), labour market and employment policies (e.g. skills-based trainings), and private sector development interventions (e.g. financial markets, trade).

Doing this will help to break down institutional silos with collaborative teams, shared objectives, and joint monitoring frameworks.

Multisectoral approaches have multiplier effects far greater than the sum of individual interventions. However, implementation is often challenged by a lack of political commitment or shared vision, weak coordination mechanisms and siloed government structures, competing priorities and limited budgets. To overcome these, it is essential to:

- Provide clear information and evidence to political, religious, and cultural leaders to build ownership.
- Strengthen institutional capacity for cross-sector coordination.
- Assign specific responsibilities, clarify roles, and ensure regular communication among stakeholders.
- Acknowledge the time and resource intensiveness of integrated approaches and plan accordingly.

The role of narrative and communication

Failing to account for communication sensitivities when presenting demographic evidence can undermine its potential and cause inadvertent harm. Missteps in messaging may provoke backlash within countries, especially in polarised or fragile political contexts, and can be amplified by misinformation. For example, voluntary family planning initiatives are sometimes mischaracterised as Western or imperialist efforts to reduce non-white populations. Resistance can also come from groups opposed to women's rights, gender equality, and migration.

To avoid these risks and maximise the utility of demographic data, stakeholders must adopt carefully designed communication strategies that are tailored to the needs, concerns, and cultural contexts of different audiences. Importantly, this requires grounding messages in African narratives that resonate with local values and lived realities.

The AU demonstrated this approach by framing its Demographic Dividend Roadmap[4] around youth empowerment, shifting focus away from more sensitive topics like family planning. This framing proved effective in engaging policymakers. However, the communication strategies that accompanied this agenda often remained rooted in

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[4] *Ibid.*

Western development discourse, limiting their resonance and ownership at the local level.

The current challenge lies in reinvigorating interest in demographic dynamics. This means identifying and communicating how demographic trends relate directly to human capital development, social protection systems, and climate resilience, which are areas of critical concern to African citizens and leaders alike.

Narratives should be built around relatable, actionable pillars such as public health and healthcare access, job creation and youth employment, quality education and skill-building, good governance and civic inclusion. These themes could foster public support, political will, and cross-sectoral alignment. It is important that such a narrative is communicated to external stakeholders in a more optimistic way. Media outlets around the world often emphasize the negatives from Africa, influencing perceptions and which may in part result in lower foreign investments and higher interest rates, impeding opportunities for transformative growth in SSA.

Communications strategies also need to ensure information integrity. Building resilience against misinformation requires more than accurate data, it demands transparent systems, trustworthy analysis, and effective communication. Data alone does not change norms and minds or drive behavioural changes. It must be translated, contextualised, and delivered in ways that are meaningful to diverse audiences. Key principles for responsible and effective demographic communication could include:

- Amplifying local voices and reflecting lived experiences, ensuring messaging is grounded in community realities.
- Engaging faith-based, traditional, and other local leaders, who often hold trusted positions in society.
- Avoiding overstating or “overselling”, instead translating evidence into reliable and credible information.
- Connecting communication efforts across levels, from global to national to local actors.
- Using independent and trusted media, and safeguarding adherence to journalistic and ethical standards.
- Being proactive, rather than simply reacting to misinformation, as rebuilding lost trust is far more difficult than maintaining it.
- Exploring creative communication formats, recognising that fact-based messaging alone may be insufficient in certain contexts.

Knowledge intermediaries could also play a vital bridging role between research, policymaking, practitioners, and the public. These actors, whether embedded within government, civil society, academia, or development agencies, are essential in translating complex demographic evidence into actionable policy recommendations. Trusted knowledge brokers not only communicate findings effectively to decision-makers and practitioners, but also ensure two-way knowledge flow, feeding back frontline experiences, concerns, and implementation realities into academic and research institutions. This feedback loop strengthens both the relevance and impact of demographic research, ensuring it continues to address real-world needs, which should be the core purpose of communication efforts.

Building networks

Effective engagement and participatory approaches must be inclusive and deeply rooted in local contexts. Local stakeholders play a central role in shaping, communicating, and implementing policies related to demographic dynamics and should be fully integrated into policy dialogues and influencing efforts.

Local civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) possess deep knowledge of community sensitivities. They have strong grassroots networks, the ability to identify local problems, collect context-relevant evidence, and often maintain access to supportive local and national policymakers. These organisations are also well-positioned to collaborate with local media outlets to amplify messages and increase visibility.

Faith-based and traditional leaders are particularly influential in many communities and can serve as crucial bridges between national policy and local acceptance. Their endorsement helps embed demographic policies in social norms and religious practices, especially on sensitive issues such as family planning, education, and gender roles.

Youth organisations and women organisations must also have a prominent role in participatory processes. Their perspectives are essential for informing planning, policy design, and investment strategies that address the needs and aspirations of the largest demographic segment in many SSA countries.

Academics and subject-matter experts add further value by strengthening the evidence base and improving the rigour of assessments of problems, solutions, and policy concepts. Similarly, professional associations, such as medical associations or educational associations, hold domain-specific knowledge and access to frontline expertise that can inform sectoral investments.

Private sector actors could be incentivised to contribute to public goals, for example through direct investment, as partners in public–private partnerships (PPPs), and through transparency and sharing information. Producer organisations and trade unions can be included to provide their perspectives on demographic evidence and dynamics, ensuring that both business and labour interests are reflected in planning processes. International business actors, including investors and rating agencies, also need to participate for tailored and targeted economic responses to exploit economic potentials by using demographic evidence.

Trusted media, both traditional and social, must be engaged proactively. They are key to ensuring that complex demographic issues are communicated clearly, responsibly, and in ways that are accessible to the wider public.

Finally, engaging policy actors, including political parties, parliamentarians, regulatory agencies, and civil servants across ministries, is critical. However, building such multi-stakeholder networks must be accompanied by rigorous political economy analysis and stakeholder mapping. These analyses help identify entry points, potential allies, sources of resistance, and power dynamics that may evolve over time, especially around election cycles or shifting political alliances.

Looking ahead: options for collective action

Key strategic actions for effective engagement should include:

- Building consensus through technical engagement, starting with less sensitive entry points. Topics like youth employment, education quality, and community health can serve as platforms for broader discussions on the demographic evidence.
- Forming coalitions of like-minded actors to increase influence and navigate resistance. Coalition partners can mobilise communities, gather evidence, influence media narratives, and advocate for policy change through coordinated and strategic actions.
- Communicating carefully and sensitively. Language matters. Poorly framed messaging can undermine women's and girls' empowerment or provoke backlash in trusting demographic (or other) evidence.

- Adopting a rights-based approach, emphasising individual autonomy and informed choice, especially for women and girls. For example, any population-related messaging must be aware of the historical misuse of demographic interventions, which in some cases have been coercive and politically motivated.
- Practicing diplomatic awareness. Policy dialogues must be grounded in sensitivity to local political histories and framed with respect and care. Strong arguments must be supported by robust, country-specific evidence, enabling early identification of risks, sensitivities, and opportunities.

To translate inclusive engagement principles into actions, the following options were discussed:

- Establish a dedicated commission or platform to facilitate engagement across stakeholder groups and develop strategic alliances around priority demographic topics.
- Build both top-down and bottom-up structures to ensure that multi-stakeholder networks function transparently and effectively across all levels of governance.
- Map existing interventions and convene regular feedback meetings to assess their progress, identify challenges, and incorporate community insights.
- Utilise demographic observatories or similar platforms to monitor progress, track information gaps, and assess the uptake and impact of data-informed policy and investment decisions.
- Ensure national alignment and local ownership of demographics-based planning and investment efforts by embedding them within existing networks and systems.

Evert-jan Quak

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