

Sub-Saharan Africa: the population emergency

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Sub-Saharan Africa has been experiencing phenomenal population growth since the beginning of the XXth Century, following several centuries of population stagnation attributable to the slave trade and colonization. The region's population in fact increased from 100 million in 1900 to 770 million in 2005. The latest United Nations projections, published in March 2007, envisaged a figure of 1.5 to 2 billion inhabitants being reached between the present and 2050.

The report of a demographic study, coordinated by the Centre Population et Développement (CEPED), commissioned by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), was published recently. The work was performed by a joint team involving scientists from the IRD and specialist academics from Belgium, Cameroon, France and the Ivory Coast. They examined the recent and projected future population trends in Sub-Saharan Africa and the relationships between these tendencies and the development of the region. This review effectively demolished some generally accepted ideas, in particular the one that Sub-Saharan Africa is underpopulated.

Today, two out of three inhabitants of this large region of Africa are under 25 years of age (twice the number prevailing in Europe) and, with 32 inhabitants per km², Sub-Saharan Africa is more densely populated on average than Latin America (28 inhabitants/km²). And although two-thirds of its population still live in rural areas, massive migration to the towns and cities is under way. Thus, whereas in 1960, just one city, Johannesburg, had a population of over one million, Africa now has

about 40 of them. At the present rate of rural exodus, half Sub-Saharan Africa's population would be urban dwellers by 2030.

This transition should be met by huge investments in construction of new infrastructures, wastewater drainage and treatment and refuse reprocessing in the great agglomerations, whose management threatens to become more and more problematic. Intra-regional migration, another safety valve for relieving the ongoing densification of the rural sphere, is severely disrupted by the conflicts and crises affecting several host countries.

The possibilities for emigration to industrialized countries are increasingly subject to control and are more difficult, particularly for the migration candidates with few qualifications. Moreover, the risks of population decrease linked to Aids appear to be receding. This factor stems especially from more effective prevention campaigns and improved access to health care. The latest UNAIDS assessments made using more reliable data brought the proportion of the African population infected by HIV to a lower figure, now put at about 5%. No country should therefore see its population decrease owing simply to the Aids epidemic.

A parallel factor at work is fecundity, equal to or higher than 5 children per woman. This is two to three times higher as in the rest of the world, an important factor being that four out of five African women live in countries where there is little access to contraception. Indeed less than 20% of women use modern contraceptive methods, as against 60% or more in Latin America and Asia. The fact that the use of contraception is progressing very slowly contributes to the strong population growth. Yet the control by women and couples over their fecundity remains the essential lever by which Sub-Saharan Africa might achieve its demographic transition.

However, campaigns promoting the balanced family such as those successfully run in other developing countries (Bangladesh, Jamaica for instance) have never really been implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, whereas the overall demographic trend points towards a stabilization of world population, that of Africa is continuing on a substantial rise. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the world's least advanced region in terms of the move towards demographic transition. The area is also behind in the development process. In 2004 for example, only six countries out of 48 obtained a growth rate equal to or greater than 7%, the threshold considered essential for achieving the first MDO—in other words the halving of poverty between now and 2015.

The prime effect of this exceptional, continuing population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa is its role as a major handicap to economic and social development of most of the region's countries. The conclusion from the research is that if the African nations want to take up the double challenge of their demographic transition and reduction of their poverty, development policies must be completely rethought. It is by the adoption and implementation of policies hinged on combined actions—involving education, prevention of mortality, equitable access to health care and to family planning—that changes bringing advances and improved living standards could be generated in Sub-Saharan Africa. This perspective makes it imperative to place the population question, one of the crucial issues for the future of most of the countries concerned, at the core of their development policies.

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