

New report predicts population of Africa will continue to grow this century

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According to the United Nations (UN) population projections, the population of Africa will continue to grow strongly in the course of this century, while on other continents population growth will decline in the

near future.

[New research](#) published in *Population, Space and Place* by Jeroen Smits from Radboud University and Lamar Crombach from ETH Zurich suggests that [population growth](#) in Africa might slow down faster than predicted by these projections.

At the end of the last century, demographers thought that population growth in Africa would slow down, similar to what had happened earlier in Latin America and Asia. However, this turned out not to be the case.

The decline in fertility—the number of births per woman—was much slower than expected, and in some sub-Saharan African countries it even increased. According to the latest UN prognosis from 2022, by the end of the century the African population will reach 3.9 billion people, over 2.5 times its current size of 1.4 billion.

Social isolation

Demographers have proposed various explanations for this deviating pattern, such as a low level of education, lack of contraceptives, or a weak position of women. However, these factors were also present in other regions where population growth has decreased.

In an article, Smits and Crombach present a new explanation: the extreme social isolation of the rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, where still most of the population lives.

According to Crombach, in the demographic literature new ideas about fertility, such as choosing to have fewer children or using contraceptives, are often seen as innovations that spread through social networks and the mass media. "Hence, for such ideas to reach the remote rural areas, there must be sufficient physical or media contact between those areas and the

cities, where [new ideas](#) usually enter a country."

"Until very recently, there was limited [physical contact](#) between cities and countryside in sub-Saharan Africa, due to great poverty, poor roads, and inadequate public transport," Smits adds. "Also, very few rural households had a TV. The spread of new family patterns through soap operas and educational programs on TV—a crucial factor in other regions—was therefore also very limited."

The key role of information

The researchers used data from the Global Data Lab (Radboud University, Nijmegen School of Management). They analyzed information from 180,000 women in 25 sub-Saharan African countries regarding their fertility (number of children in the past five years and preferred family size), where they lived (how far from [urban areas](#)), TV ownership, and other relevant characteristics. The study period runs from 1995 to 2010, a period in which the deviating African pattern was very clear.

The importance of [information exchange](#) emerges clearly from the findings, according to Crombach. "Women living closer to urban areas or in households with a TV have fewer children and a smaller desired family size. Moreover, we see that the role of TV ownership decreases strongly for households living closer to a city, while the effect of distance largely disappears for households with a TV. How information spreads, through physical contact or TV programs, therefore seems to matter less."

New projections

According to the researchers, their findings have implications for future

population projections for Africa.

Smits says, "If information exchange is indeed as important as our study suggests, the situation in the region could change quickly. Currently, the isolation of African rural areas is rapidly being broken by the spread of mobile phones and social media. Young families in rural areas nowadays have many more opportunities to come into contact with modern family patterns than some 10–15 years ago."

The researchers, therefore, expect that population growth in the region will decrease faster than previously predicted. On June 11—World Population Day—when the new UN population projection will be released, it will become clear whether this change is already reflected in the forecast for Africa.

More information: Lamar G. A. Crombach et al, Understanding the urban-rural fertility divide in sub-Saharan Africa: The critical role of social isolation, *Population, Space and Place* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/psp.2801](https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2801)

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