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The Challenges of Accelerating the Fertility Transition in Western Africa

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AUTHORS' TIME ZONE

If accepted for presentation, the authors are prepared to deliver the paper virtually; the main presenter would be Dr. Aristide Romaric Bado or Dr. Jean-Pierre Guengant (all authors would attend the presentation).

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KEY WORDS

- Fertility and childbirth
- Family planning and contraception
- Policy
- Politics and demography

ABSTRACT

Although the fertility transition has started in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), its pace, particularly in Western Africa, remains very slow. The demand for large families remains high and levels of contraceptive use are increasing very slowly. Accelerating the fertility decrease in Western Africa appears to be crucial to enable the countries to enter a demographic window of opportunity, to capture a first demographic dividend, and to reach the status of emerging market economies. However, African and international policymakers do not agree on the strategies needed to trigger a faster fertility decline. In this respect, three school of thoughts have emerged: promoting socioeconomic development first and foremost; advocating for universal education and enrolment at the secondary level, especially for girls; and expanding and strengthening family planning programs. This paper argues that none of these approaches alone would achieve the needed acceleration of the fertility decline. On the contrary, it is suggested that a blend of the three approaches will be necessary, along with better integrated policies. In addition, the various policy levers will need to be redesigned and refined. In particular, family planning programs will not only need to focus on birth spacing but also on managing family size to enable women to enter the labor market and get decent jobs. The paper is based on an extensive analysis of Western African survey data and policy documents, in particular those of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. It offers also a long-term historical perspective as well as comparisons with the other less developed regions of the world.

DETAILED PROPOSAL

The Issue

The population of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was estimated at 1.1 billion people in mid-2020 and is expected to almost double between 2020 and 2050. Depending on the pace of the fertility decline, the SSA population could possibly reach between 2.7 to 5.2 billion people by 2100 (United Nations, 2019). The population of Western Africa was 402 million people in mid-2020 and will increase to 796 million people in 2050, according to the Medium variant of the 2019 UN population projections (United Nations, 2019).

However, Sub-Saharan (SSA) and Western African countries have started their demographic transition—the gradual shift from high death and birth rates to lower rates, reaching a new equilibrium. Nonetheless, SSA and Western African countries have entered their fertility transition 30 to 35 years later than the other less developed regions and the pace of their fertility declines has been much slower.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Africa is lagging behind the other sub-regions of SSA in the completion of its demographic transition. The demand for large families remains high in this sub-region and the total fertility rate (TFR) is still above five children per woman, with more than 7 children per woman in Niger. The contraceptive prevalence rate for modern methods in Western Africa remains low as well—estimated at 16 percent of women in reproductive ages.

As a result, the rate of population growth in Western Africa is estimated at 2.7 percent per year (Population Reference Bureau, 2020).

The population of SSA and Western Africa has experienced an annual rate of population growth of more than 2.5 percent for more than 50 years, which is a unique feature in the history of the world population. This sustained population growth in SSA was not accompanied by strong economic growth. Indeed, the increase of the SSA GDP per capita between 1960 and 2019 (only 48 percent) has been modest and by far the lowest of all other less developed regions. The rapid population growth of SSA and the Western African region has made more difficult the building and the maintenance of the human capital (education, health, etc.).

Overall, it appears that accelerating the fertility decrease in SSA, and particularly in Western Africa, will be crucial to enable SSA and Western African countries to enter a demographic window of opportunity, to capture a first demographic dividend, and to reach the status of emerging market economies. In addition, lower fertility levels would bring many benefits to the health of women and their children, to help women to enter the labor market and get decent jobs, not to mention the possibility to reduce high poverty levels (Beegle and Christiaensen, 2019).

Theoretical Focus

The demographic background of sub-Saharan Africa and its relatively poor economic outcomes raise several policy questions. Is it legitimate to try to accelerate the fertility transition in the region or should policymakers adopt a laissez-faire approach and let the socioeconomic development process help complete the demographic transition? In particular, what benefits would a faster fertility decline bring to the populations and their socioeconomic prospects? Conversely, what could be the impediments that sustained high fertility levels would impose on the populations' welfare and their socioeconomic prospects? These questions appear to be particularly acute in Western Africa.

However, Western African and international policymakers do not agree on the strategies needed to trigger a rapid fertility decline in the region. In this respect, three school of thoughts have emerged: promoting socioeconomic development first and foremost; advocating for universal education, especially for girls; and expanding and strengthening family planning programs. Each school of thoughts promotes its solution as the best, if not the only one, to foster the welfare and socioeconomic prospects of the population.

This paper argues that none of these approaches alone would achieve the needed acceleration of the fertility decline. On the contrary, the paper suggests that a blend of the three approaches will be necessary. First, the various policy levers will need to be implemented concomitantly, through better integrated policies, in order to benefit from the synergies between the various policy levers (May and Rotenberg, 2020). In addition, the various policy levers will need to be refined and recalibrated. For instance, family planning will not only need to focus on birth spacing but also on managing family size to enable women to enter the labor market.

Data & Research Method

The paper will be based first on national data and documents, especially those related to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, particularly the national population policies adopted in these countries: Burkina Faso (population policy designed in 2010 and adopted in 2012; see Burkina Faso, 2012), Niger (population policy updated in 2019; see République du Niger, 2019), and Mali (population policy updated in 2017; see République du Mali, 2017a, 2017b). In addition, the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHSs) data will be used, as well as international data available at the World Bank, the United Nations Population Division, and other international and African regional organizations.

Expected Findings & Discussion

A detailed analysis of the national population policies of several Western African countries demonstrates that most population policies are aimed at enabling their target populations to fulfill their high levels of desired fertility in the best possible socioeconomic and health conditions.

Therefore, to accelerate the fertility transition in Western Africa, countries will first need to address and change prevailing pronatalist norms and promote a smaller family size, as it was done in other less developed and emerging countries. This will require information, education, and communication (IEC) and behavioral communication change (BCC) campaigns, in order to change present norms and help increase contraceptive use. These IEC and BCC campaigns will need to be multi-media (including social media), culturally acceptable, repetitive, and more visible than previous similar efforts.

In terms of content, these communication campaigns will need to move away from the family planning programs' current emphasis on birth spacing. Actually, the emphasis on spacing does not modify the existing high ideal number of children and probably explain that in about half of the SSA countries, more than 65 percent of the demand for family planning is for birth spacing. Conversely, in most of the other less developed countries, less than 35 percent of the demand for family planning is for spacing reasons, and about 65 percent is for limiting. In these countries, women are in a better position to decide the number of children they want to have during their entire reproductive life span. The interpretation in SSA, and especially in Western Africa, that 'Family Planning Equals Spacing of Births' was deemed by family planning advocates in the 1980s and 1990s to be the most culturally acceptable slogan, especially in French-speaking Africa, with the view of counteracting those opposed to all forms of family planning. However, this approach will need to change because the socioeconomic and political context of population and gender issues has changed in SSA and Western Africa. Yet, this 'spacing' interpretation is still dominant in the SSA and Western African media and among the health workers. The three dimensions of family planning – delaying the first birth, spacing between children, and stopping after having reached the desired number of children for which couples can care – will need to be delivered in a culturally acceptable way. The implementation of such a renewed approach should engage SSA and Western African women in income generating

activities, along with expanded training and educational opportunities. In short, this renewed approach will contribute to the empowerment of SSA and Western African women. Also, economists will need to recognize the demographic dimension of development which is not generally the case, as illustrated in the literature on economic emergence.

To accelerate the fertility transition in Western Africa, policymakers and leaders will need to reassess public policies to reduce high fertility levels and ensure their implementation. To achieve this large-scale policy reform, policymakers will need also to focus on harnessing the synergies between the key policy levers when designing broad population policies. These policy levers are: female education, women's access to labor markets and productive assets (land and finances), quality family planning and reproductive health services, nutrition programs, and legal reforms (age of marriage, property rights, etc.). All these policy levers should be understood as critical to women's empowerment, and should be implemented concomitantly. In addition, policymakers will need to be properly briefed on population and development issues. Moreover, the unwavering support of Western African leaders will be needed to implement this better integrated population policy agenda through proactive fertility reduction interventions and the strengthening of family planning and population institutions (May, 2017a, 2017b; May and Guengant, 2020).

Conclusion

Today, the majority of SSA countries and, especially, Western African countries, are at a critical stage in their development. The next decades will determine whether these countries will be able, as did many other less developed countries, to accelerate their demographic transition, to capture a first demographic dividend, and to become emerging market economies. One path to achieve these goals is to revisit the population policies in SSA and Western Africa, in order to adjust them to the overall goal of rapidly reducing high levels of fertility. This will be achieved by promoting better integrated population policies as well as redesigning and recalibrating the various policy levers.

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