



HAL
open science

John F. May, Jean-Pierre Guengant. 2020. Demography and economic emergence of sub-Saharan Africa. Académie royale de Belgique, Pocket Book Academy series, 152 pages
Mariam Bougma

► **To cite this version:**

Mariam Bougma. John F. May, Jean-Pierre Guengant. 2020. Demography and economic emergence of sub-Saharan Africa. Académie royale de Belgique, Pocket Book Academy series, 152 pages. Population (English edition), 2023, Book Reviews, 78 (3-4), pp.522-524. hal-04569889

HAL Id: hal-04569889

<https://hal.science/hal-04569889>

Submitted on 6 May 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

John F. May, Jean-Pierre Guengant. 2020. *Demography and economic emergence of sub-Saharan Africa*. Académie royale de Belgique, Pocket Book Academy series, 152 pages.

This book, the fruit of a collective research project, is a fascinating one. It offers a detailed explanation of the connections between the populations of sub-Saharan Africa and the economic development of countries in the region. In doing so it draws on numerous concepts from both demography and economics, which may make it less accessible to the uninitiated.

Made up of six chapters, it begins with a general overview of the demographic question in sub-Saharan Africa, and then delves into the specificities of each country. In the first chapter, the authors survey the history of population growth since the countries in the region gained their independence, as well as advances in population health, comparing these gains in sub-Saharan Africa to those seen elsewhere in the world. In general, although mortality rates remain high, considerable efforts have been made to lower them, with successful results. Between 1960 and 2015, life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa increased by two decades, going from less than 40 to 60 in 31 countries, and reaching more than 70 in island countries.

In the second chapter, May and Guengant present the trends in population dynamics projected by the United Nations for the years 2030 (the target year for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals), 2063 (the horizon of the African Union's 50-year agenda), and 2100 under various fertility scenarios (low, medium and high). For each scenario, the authors report the expected population size, along with the associated consequences. Particular emphasis is placed on the economic burden that countries must shoulder under each one. But in all scenarios, sub-Saharan Africa will continue to experience substantial population growth over the course of the century, with ongoing negative effects on GDP (including mean GDP per capita). In their analysis, the authors take into account the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic: according to the IMF's June 2020 forecasts, average GDP per capita is set to fall further in 2020 in many sub-Saharan African countries dependent on oil imports.

The third chapter looks at the interconnected dynamics of population and development. The authors outline the conditions that enable countries to begin a demographic transition, and explain how they can take advantage of a demographic dividend, defined as the economic surplus that results from an increase in the size of the working population relative to the dependent population. Some sub-Saharan African countries are already some way along in the demographic transition, in particular thanks to considerable decreases in infant and child mortality. Others, however, have not yet really started, with fertility and mortality levels that remain persistently high. The authors look at the population policy efforts of Asian countries, often presented as an exemplar for the demographic transition. They emphasize that for many African countries, there is considerable debate around opportunities to capture an initial demographic dividend resulting

from a decrease in the dependency ratio (i.e. the ratio of the inactive population—children and older people—to the working-age population), itself a prerequisite for the second demographic dividend arising from additional investments in national economies made possible by the greater accumulated assets of retirees with a lower financial burden of inactive children.

The fourth chapter delves at length into debates on contraceptive policies in sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular on their effectiveness in decreasing the number of children per woman. It emphasizes that fertility levels have fallen significantly since the 1980s and 1990s, even if this decline has been late and slow compared to countries elsewhere in the world. May and Guengant examine how, in sub-Saharan Africa, governments' low level of engagement with the issue, their late adoption of population policies to encourage family planning, and a lack of resources have all contributed to delaying the implementation of effective programmes to initiate a demographic transition. They highlight three objectives to be pursued in order to achieve a fertility transition: higher age at first child-birth, wider birth spacing, and birth control. They emphasize that sub-Saharan countries have largely limited themselves to the second of these objectives, which, while improving the reproductive health of African women, is not sufficient in itself to decrease the number of children.

The fifth chapter deals with the current determination of African leaders to decrease both mortality and fertility. May and Guengant present the various policies needed to capture the first demographic dividend. In their view, what is lacking is a combination of educational policies that take gender into account, health policy, good governance, and finally a population policy that yields a population structure conducive to the demographic dividend: more working-age persons and fewer dependent persons (children, youth, and older adults).

In the sixth and final chapter, the authors present a critical assessment of progress and prospects for the demographic dividend and economic emergence in sub-Saharan Africa. They examine this possibility with reference to the Asian model, reviewing the actions taken in Asia to ensure both a rapid demographic transition and economic emergence. However, in urging African countries to copy this model, it is important to recognize that the two regions are very different, and measures taken in Asia cannot simply be duplicated in Africa. The issue of human capital formation should also be addressed. Using policies that limit childbirths to influence population structure is one thing; ensuring that the country's population has access to high-quality education and training in order to exploit the demographic dividend and achieve economic growth is another. In examining the links between population and economy in sub-Saharan Africa, this book revives an old debate around which the African political sphere has struggled to reach consensus. In discussing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the economies of the region, however, it adds new elements to that existing debate.

It would have been interesting to include in the analysis North African and Latin American countries that have experienced demographic transition (with

infant mortality decreasing from 20.1% in 1950-55 to 2.3% in 2015-2020, and fertility from 6.8 to 3.25 children per woman in the same period) without enjoying a demographic dividend. In looking at the demographic transition, the authors could also have discussed questions of ethics^{(1),(2),(3)} and respect for fundamental rights in health policy (coercive policies are no longer acceptable).

Moreover, today, as Christophe Guilmoto has emphasized,⁽⁴⁾ demographers are now revising the hypothesis that emerging Asia constitutes a model of successful demographic transition. The issue of population ageing is now a matter of serious concern on that continent, and could have been looked at in the context of African demographic projections as well (including how the problem may impact economies in the future). Population policies to accelerate the demographic transition will necessarily give rise to this problem in the long term, raising the question of whether and how it can be taken to account as of now. This ageing is a consequence of fertility levels that are now considered too low in many countries, including Asia. Too high in Africa, too low elsewhere: fertility is resistant to policy, perhaps because the overall well-being of the population should take precedence over a politically idealized level of equilibrium.

Mariam Bougma

Translated by Paul Reeve

(1) Locoh T., Vandermeersch C. 2006. Fertility control in Third World countries. In Caselli G., Vallin J., Wunsch G. (eds), *Demography: Analysis and Synthesis*. Vol. IV. (p. 95-121). Elsevier

(2) Gastineau B., Adjamagbo A. 2014. Les droits individuels face aux politiques de population. Regard sur trois pays africains : Bénin, Madagascar, Maroc. *Autrepart*, 70(2), 125-142. <https://doi.org/10.3917/autr.070.0125>

(3) Vella, S. 2003. Éthique et pratiques reproductives : les techniques de sélection sexuelle en Inde. *Autrepart*, 28, 147-163. <https://doi.org/10.3917/autr.028.0147>

(4) Guilmoto C. Z. 2015. The Masculinization of Births: Overview and Current Knowledge. *Population (English edition)*, 70(2), 185-243. <https://doi.org/10.3917/popu.1502.0201>