Nigeria’s Youth Bulge – From Potential ‘Demographic Bomb’ to ‘Demographic Dividend’

Introduction

By 2030, total global population, currently estimated as 7.3 billion people, is projected to reach 8.5 billion, that is, an additional 85 million people annually (UNDESA, 2017). Nigeria, the seventh most populous country in the world has experienced rapid population growth from the mid-20th century. From an estimated population of 38 million in 1950, the current population is estimated at just over 195 million and is projected to reach 236 million by 2030 and 410 million by 2050, making it the third most populous nation in the world by then (UNDESA 2017). Similar trends in population growth have been observed in and are projected for other countries in the region. From a figure of 228 million in 1950, Africa’s population is currently estimated at 1.28 billion and is projected to more than double by 2063 (UNDESA, 2017), when the continent aspires to have attained greater integration and economic prosperity, as outlined in the Africa Union Commission’s Agenda 2063.

Demographic Transition–Cross-Country Perspectives

The rapid population growth in Nigeria, and indeed the region, has been attributed to several factors, including increased public investments in the social sectors (heath and education as well as water, sanitation and hygiene) resulting in *inter alia*, a decline in maternal mortality rates and an increase in fertility rates. These, together with economic and a host of socio-cultural

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1 This Policy Brief is produced by the Strategic Policy Advisory Unit of the UNDP Nigeria Country Office. The opinions expressed in this Brief however, are those of the authors (Ojijo Odhiambo and Abubakar Metcho) and do not represent the views of UNDP, the United Nations or any of its affiliate organizations.

2 The 2050 projected population estimates vary from low of 374 million to a high of 450 million.

3 The seven aspirations of Agenda 2063 are: a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; an integrated continent; an Africa governed on the basis of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law; a peaceful and secure Africa; an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics; people-driven development; and an Africa that is united and influential global player and partner.
Demographic transition generally refers to the transition from high birth and death rates to lower birth and death rates as a country develops. Beyond the rapid increase in total population, Nigeria is projected to experience a major ‘demographic transition’ between now and 2050\(^4\) with a projected gradual decline in gross dependency ratio (population aged less than 15 years plus those over 65 years of age divided by population of working age – 15–64 years expressed as a percentage) as shown below.


As can be seen in the fig 1 above, gross dependency ratio is projected to fall gradually from 88.2 per 100 in 2015 to 65 dependents per 100 by 2050, although in actual fact the total number of dependents (those aged less than 15 years plus those aged above 65 years) will increase. Similar trends will be observed at the regional level where the number of young people is projected to grow, albeit with varying cross-country dynamics. Whereas in 2015 an estimated

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23 percent of the world’s 3.1 billion population aged under 25 years, that is 721 million, lived in Africa, this number is expected to grow by 35 percent to reach 972 million by 2030, representing 29 percent of the total global population of under 25 years (UNDESA 2017). It is perhaps against this background of an imminent ‘youth bulge’ that African leaders have placed the population, and especially the youth, debate at the very centre of regional development policy agenda, exemplified by, for instance, the 2017 African Union (AU) Summit on “Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth” which highlighted the need to ‘put young people first’.

To situate the projected Nigerian demographic transition within the proper context, it is instructive to juxtapose the projected trends of youth population in Nigeria with those of other countries. As can be seen in the fig 2 below, Nigeria is projected to witness a steady growth in the population aged below 25 years between 2020 and 2050 while in India the under 25 population will only witness an increase between 2020 and 2030 and thereafter decline. China, Bangladesh and Brazil on the hand are all projected to register general declines in population under 25 years during this period. In effect, Nigeria is expected to continue experiencing a youth bulge between now and 2050, registering increases in total population for all the under 25 age cohorts.

The foregoing would, logically, lead one to ask some important questions: Is Nigeria’s youth bulge a blessing or a curse? Is it a time bomb or can it be harnessed to pay dividend? What could be done to harness and engage this important resource in order to promote socio-economic development and tackle the myriad of development challenges facing the country? This Policy Brief attempts to interrogate some of these policy issues, highlighting possible remedial measures with a view to stimulating policy dialogue around them.

‘Youth Bulge’ – ‘Bomb’ or ‘Dividend’?

The question as to whether Nigeria’s ‘youth bulge’ is a ticking time bomb or can indeed be harnessed to pay‘dividend’ may sound rather rhetorical since it all depends on the actions by or rather inaction on the part of policy and decision makers at all levels of governance. But beyond the rhetoric, in the final analysis, the outcome of Nigeria’s demographic transition is dependent on policy choices and actions taken by the government, local populations and other stakeholders. Indeed, the outcome of the country’s demographic transition and the youth bulge will be determined and defined by the interaction of factors within the rather nuanced and complex political, policy, socio-cultural and economic environment within which the demographic transition itself takes place. That the ‘youth bulge’ will present many challenges to the Nigerian government and the wider global community cannot be gainsaid. The projected growth in the youth population will present many challenges including, but not limited, to increased demand for services, such as schools, healthcare, infrastructure, food, employment, decent jobs, social protection, especially for the aged and clean water and environment. While the demand for all these services will rise with increasing youth population, ultimately exerting a strain on the country’s limited resources, it is perhaps the lack of employment opportunities and decent incomes and consequently, a growing sense of desperation and hopelessness among this group that has the greatest potential to turn the ‘youth bulge’ into a ‘demographic bomb’. Creating decent and secure jobs and enhancing livelihoods for the youth, presently and in the future, thus holds the key to national peace, freedoms and prosperity.
But it possible to transform the ‘youth bulge’ into a ‘demographic dividend’ and prevent a potential ‘demographic bomb’. UNFPA (2016) has defined ‘demographic dividend’ within the context of the opportunities for rapid transformation in economic growth experienced by countries as a result of changes in the age cycle coupled with decent socio-economic policies which occurs when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64 years) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population (14 years and younger, and 65 years and older). As a country progresses through the demographic transition, shifts in the age structure causes the working-age population to increase relative to the dependent children and elderly population. When a country has fewer people to support, there is a window of opportunity for rapid economic growth and prosperity. But the benefits of growth ought to be equitably shared, including with and among the young people by paying due attention to their needs and aspirations.

There are indeed many channels through which the youth bulge can be transformed into a demographic dividend. A foundational issue in reaping demographic dividend is ensuring that the youth actually remain alive and healthy. It is also important for them to be educated, and appropriately trained and skilled for the labour market; have assured access to factors of production especially land and capital; have access to constant flow of ideas for innovation; and that they are, ultimately, engaged in productive economic activities. Beyond training and acquisition of skills and being engaged in gainful employment however, there is a need to ensure that the young people have low(er) fertility rates than the older population, ultimately, lowering the dependency ratio and yielding demographic bonus. The fast-growing young population could provide the transformational force for the country, and indeed the region, but only if the there is a policy shift towards greater investments in the youth and unlocking the latent potentials of the services sector as well as sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing, which have historically been neglected in preference to oil and gas sector.\footnote{For instance, it has been estimated that if Africa is to achieve food security and reduce poverty the region will need to quadruple its agricultural production.}

Moreover, there is no shortage of countries which have ‘successfully’ exploited the window of
opportunity presented by the youth bulge against which Nigeria could benchmark her actions. China, India and Bangladesh all offer useful case studies in transforming the youth bulge into a window of opportunity through reducing fertility rate and importantly, investing in the youth and sectors of the economy that can benefit them such as agriculture and rural development; manufacturing; and technology and innovation.

**Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

Nigeria’s youth bulge presents many challenges to governments – both Federal and State level– as well as numerous opportunities for economic transformation and prosperity. Under ‘business-as usual’ scenario, the youth bulge would potentially turn into a ‘demographic bomb’, especially if the youth cannot find durable employment opportunities, earn descent incomes and secure their future. Such a scenario would lead to a creeping sense of desperation, hopelessness and vulnerability which can be a pre-disposing factor to political manipulation and indoctrination, and consequently insecurity and escalation of crises as is currently being witnessed in the North East of the country and the oil-rich Niger delta area. But it is also clear that under ‘business unusual’ scenario it is possible to transform the youth bulge into a demographic dividend. The youth bulge presents a wide window of opportunity for the country but only if the huge potential of the youth is properly harnessed and they attain quality education and healthcare services; are equipped with the necessary skills, not just for the present but also for the future; they, through mechanisms such as access to education and family planning or what is widely referred to as ‘future planning’, have a lower fertility rate; and have assured access to productive resources and opportunities. The pivotal role that focus on science, technology and innovation can play in transforming the youth bulge into demographic dividend is perhaps worthy of special mention especially given the rapid rate of globalization.

In sum, in the particular context of Nigeria, the transformation of ‘youth bulge’ into a ‘demographic dividend’ could be achieved through:
• Development of national policy that specifically addresses the need for transformation of the youth bulge into a demographic dividend.
• Securing greater involvement of all stakeholders, including local political and religious leaders in the population dynamics discourse and awareness raising on the socio-cultural root causal factors of the youth bulge.
• Increased public investments education and health, especially family planning services, as well as other basic services and amenities.
• Increased investments, through smart partnerships, especially with the private sector, in training, skills acquisition and technology and innovation in diverse fields.
• Increased investments in modernizing agriculture, including agro-based industries and rural development to optimally utilize the abundant factors of production – land and labour as the basis of economic diversification and growth.
• Continuous policy research, analysis and dialogue on Nigeria’s population dynamics.

References