

The Outlook for Population in Africa

By United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division

Demographic Profile

Africa consists of 58 countries and territories of which 51 are in sub-Saharan Africa. Thirty-three out of the current 46 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) designated by the United Nations as of Nov. 1, 2023 are in sub-Saharan Africa. Countries in Northern Africa and Southern Africa present distinctive demographic patterns as they are more advanced in the demographic transition compared to most of sub-Saharan Africa.

Women in Southern Africa had an average total fertility rate (TFR) of 2.4 births per woman in 2023, and those in Northern Africa three births. Elsewhere in Africa, total fertility has remained higher, with 4.1 births per woman in Eastern Africa, 4.8 in Western Africa and 5.5 births in Middle Africa. By 2050, these differences are projected to have become smaller: women in Middle Africa will bear 3.5 children on average by 2050, compared to two children in Southern Africa (Chart 1).

The under-five mortality rate has declined significantly in most of Africa since 1950, but shows large differences across sub-regions. After having been a forerunner in the decline of child mortality for most of the 20th century, Southern Africa experienced an increase

for about 15 years starting in the 1990s resulting from the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The under-five mortality rate is three times higher in Western Africa compared to Northern Africa in 2023. While almost 10 out of 100 children will not celebrate his/her fifth birthday in Western Africa, this figure is more than three times lower in Northern Africa. These differences reflect important variations in access to basic healthcare services and infrastructure across the African continent.

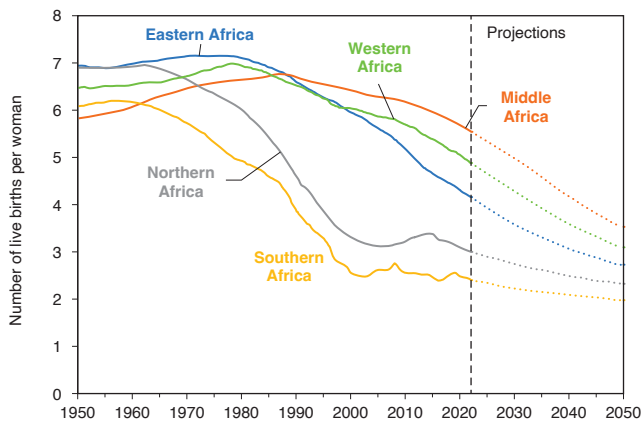
In 2020, some 22.2 million international migrants lived in sub-Saharan Africa, representing 2% of the 1.1 billion people living in the region. Nearly 27% of all international migrants in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020 were refugees or asylum seekers, compared to 12% globally.

In 2020, the number of migrants originating from countries in sub-Saharan Africa was 28.3 million. Of these, approximately 17.8 million were living in another country within the region, while 10.5 million were residing outside the region. Within the region, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda were the main destinations of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. France, the United Kingdom and the United States were also home to large numbers (1 million or more) of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.¹

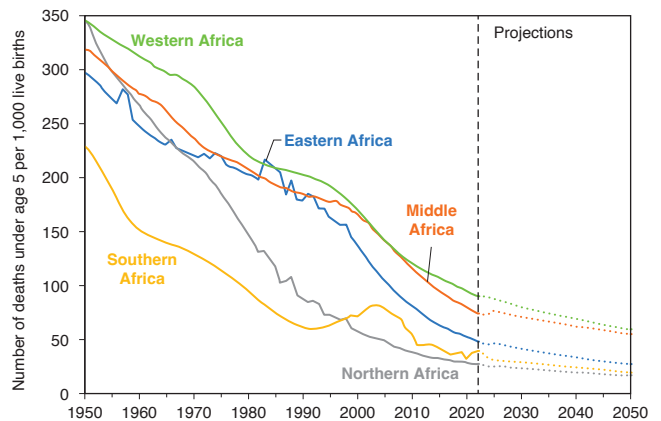
CHART 1

Total fertility & child mortality in African sub-regions

Total fertility rate



Under-five mortality rate



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). International Migrant Stock 2020. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

Over Half of Growth in Global Population Through 2050 in sub-Saharan Africa

In mid-November 2022, the global population is estimated to have reached 8 billion. According to UN projections, the global population will continue to grow and could reach around 8.5 billion in 2030, and 9.7 billion two decades later, in 2050.

More than half of the growth of the global population through 2050 will occur in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2023, the region hosted 1.2 billion people (Chart 2). With a growth rate of 2.6% per year, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is projected to double in less than three decades, surpassing 2 billion inhabitants by the late 2040s. By mid-century, more than one-fifth of the global population will reside in sub-Saharan Africa.

By contrast, the populations of the other regions are projected to stabilize and/or decline by the end of the century, and therefore they will contribute less to global growth through 2050. Slightly more than one out of four people in the world will be added in Central and Southern Asia; and about one out of eight will be added in Northern Africa and Western Asia. By comparison, the population of Eastern and Southeastern Asia, as well as the combined population of Europe and Northern America, will not add to the world population during the same period. Both regions are expected to see their respective population decline by mid-century.

At the country level, just eight countries, five of which are located in Africa, will account for more than half of the projected increase in

the global population between 2024 and 2050: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines and the United Republic of Tanzania.

These population projections come with some uncertainty. The further the projection horizon, the larger the uncertainty and the larger the range of plausible population sizes. By the end of the century, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is expected to reach 3.4 billion, but it could lie between 3 and 4.8 billion with a likelihood of 95%.

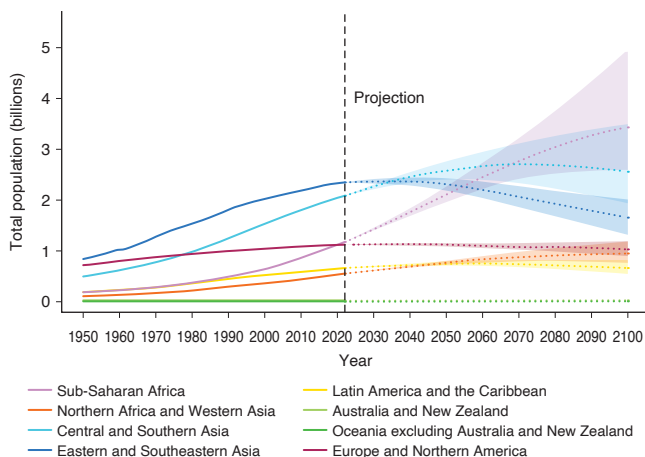
Growth Driven by High Fertility & Population Momentum

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest fertility levels worldwide. Despite a steady decline over the last several decades, the total fertility rate in the region stood at 4.5 births per woman in 2023. In about half of the countries of the region, total fertility was higher than four births per woman. The average number of live births per woman is projected to continue declining over the next several decades (Chart 3).

The high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa is the main driver of future population growth. Out of 945 million people being added to the region between 2022 and 2050, nearly 500 million (43%) will be added due to fertility (Chart 4). The second-largest driver of population growth in sub-Saharan Africa is population momentum, an unavoidable increase in a population due to past demographic

CHART 2

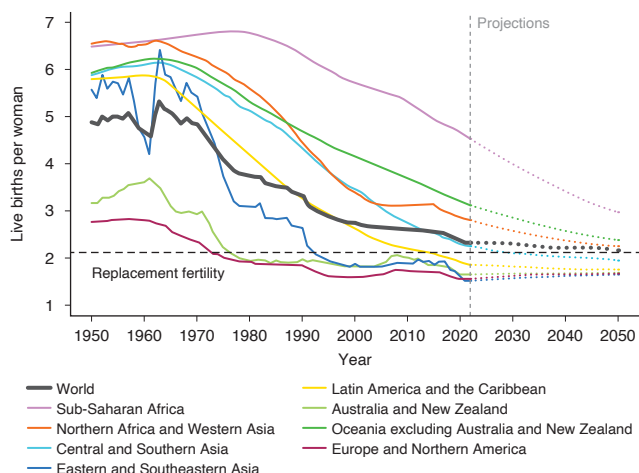
Total population estimates 1950-2021, & medium scenario with 95% prediction intervals, 2022-2100



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

CHART 3

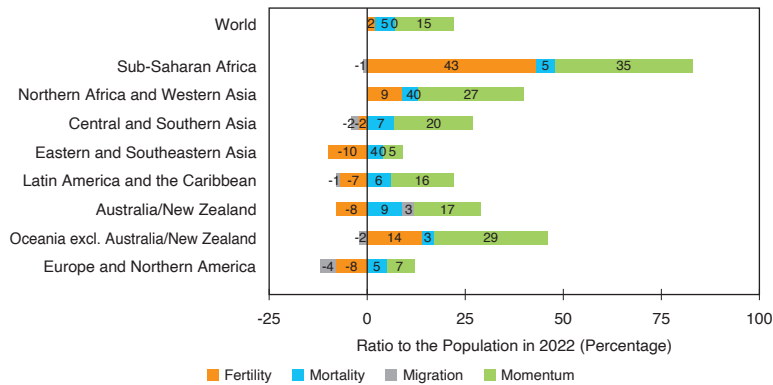
Total fertility rate estimates, 1950-2021, & medium projections, 2022-2050



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

CHART 4

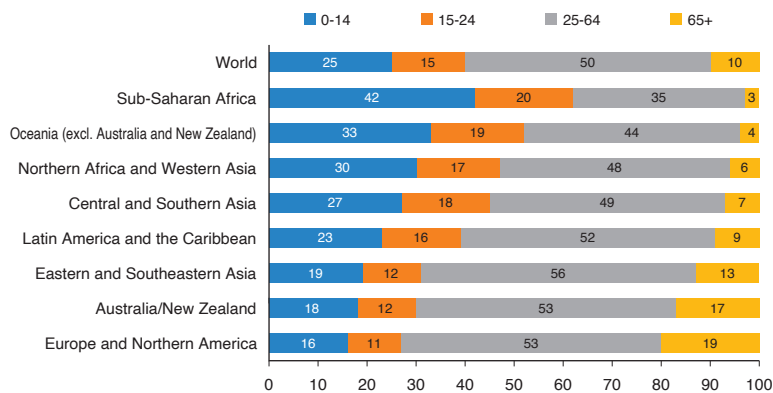
Components of population growth between 2022 & 2050



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

CHART 5

Percentage of population by age group, 2023



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

trends. Some 400 million people (35%) will be added to the population of sub-Saharan Africa by 2050 just because a large number of women of childbearing age will become mothers during this period. Even though much of the anticipated population growth will be due to the youthfulness of the current population, a faster decline in fertility rates would help to slow the growth of the population over the next several decades.

Africa, in particular sub-Saharan Africa, will remain the most youthful region for the remainder of this century. One immediate consequence of the rapid and sustained population growth is the

young age structure or “youthfulness” of Africa’s population. The median age of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, that is, the age dividing the population in two halves of equal size, was just below 19 years in 2023. By comparison, the median age was 38 years or higher in Australia and New Zealand, Europe and Northern America, and Eastern and Southeastern Asia.

In 2023, children under the age of 15 accounted for almost 42% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa (Chart 5). This age group is as large today as the size of the total population of the region was in 1990. Close to 62% of the population living in sub-Saharan Africa is under the age of 25 (Chart 6). By mid-century, a third of the population of sub-Saharan Africa will be children under the age of 15 and more than half of the population of the region will still be under the age of 25. By comparison, only 16% of the population of Europe and Northern America are children under age 15 and slightly over a quarter of the total population is aged 25 years or younger. The working-age population (25-64 years) in sub-Saharan Africa is projected to increase from 35% of the total population in 2022 to 43% in 2050. This shift in the population age structure provides an opportunity for a demographic dividend in the region, produced by an increase in the proportion of people in the main productive ages.²

At the other end of the age range, only 3% of the people in sub-Saharan Africa were “older persons” aged 65 years or older in 2023, compared to 19% in Europe and Northern America, 17% in Australia and New Zealand, and 13% in Eastern and Southeastern Asia. By 2050, older persons will still represent less than 5% of the sub-Saharan African population. However, the number of older persons in the region will grow fast, almost tripling to more than 100 million by 2050.

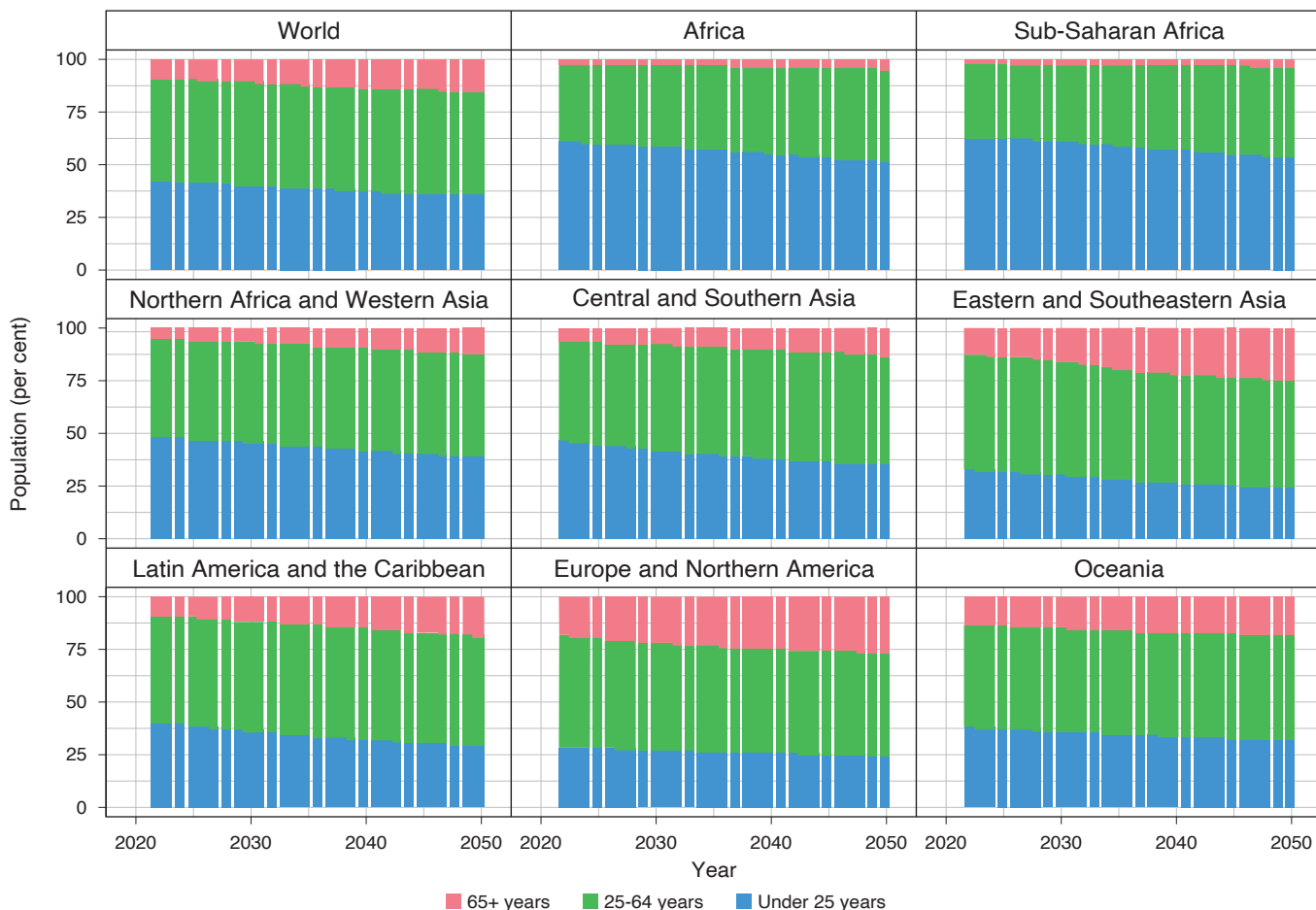
Challenges & Opportunities from Demographic Change

Demographic dividend

Sub-Saharan Africa will have a window of opportunity to achieve accelerated economic development, arising from an increase in the share of the working age population as mortality and fertility rates continue to decline, termed the demographic dividend. The

2 David Bloom, David Canning and Jaypee Sevilla (2003). *The Demographic Dividend: A new perspective on the economic consequences of population change*. RAND Corporation.

CHART 6

Population age structure (2022 to 2050)

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022*. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

magnitude of the demographic dividend will depend in part on the speed of the demographic transition, that is, how fast fertility and mortality rates decline. The demographic transition could account for an additional increase of 25% in per capita income in 2050.³

It is not automatic or guaranteed, however, for a country to harness the demographic dividend because it depends upon how well a country manages its demographic transition from high to low levels of mortality and fertility. Benefitting from this demographic advantage also requires policies supporting the acceleration of the

demographic transition, sufficient resources to raise investments in education and health, economic reforms and job creation, as well as good governance.⁴ Furthermore, a favorable global economic environment, peace and security and sustained development assistance that provides essential financial resources, technical expertise and capacity building support are beneficial. If not properly managed, the large share of young people can also lead to social and economic challenges.⁵ It is estimated that the region will have to create high-productivity jobs at an unprecedented rate of about 18

3 International Monetary Fund (2015). How Can Sub-Saharan Africa Harness the Demographic Dividend? *Regional Economic Outlook, April 2015, Sub-Saharan Africa*. International Monetary Fund. Washington, D.C.: pp. 25-45.

4 African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2015). *Synthesis Report on the Demographic Dividend in Africa*. UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office.

5 David Canning, Raja Sangeeta and Abdo Yazbeck (2015). *Africa's Demographic Transition: Dividend or disaster?* Washington, D.C.: The World Bank Group.

million jobs per year until 2035 to absorb the new entrants in the labor force, in addition to designing policies that could transition away from the informal sector, estimated to account for 90% of the jobs in the region.⁶

Rapid population growth

Rapid population growth is a result of one of the greatest successes of social and economic development: the substantial lengthening of the average human lifespan due to improvements in public health, nutrition, personal hygiene and medicine. Continuing rapid population growth, however, is also partly the result of a failure to ensure that all people, everywhere, have the knowledge, ability and means to determine whether and when to have children: more than 160 million women in the world have an unmet need for family planning.

Sustained high fertility and rapid population growth present challenges to the achievement of sustainable development. The necessity of educating growing numbers of children and young people, for example, draws resources away from efforts to improve the quality of education. Conversely, improved well-being and inclusive economic growth is likely to hasten the transition towards lower fertility in countries with continuing high levels.

Poverty reduction

Reducing poverty in the context of rapid population growth remains a formidable challenge. Even when large numbers of people are lifted out of poverty, the proportion of the population living below the poverty line may be stagnant or even increase. The doubling or more of the population in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa between 2024 and 2050 will put additional pressure on already scarce resources, challenging efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. For example, Angola has experienced population growth rates above 3% per year since the early 1970s due to the combined effect of persistent high fertility levels and remarkable reductions in infant and child mortality, in particular during the past two decades. In 2018, around half of the Angolan population was living in extreme poverty. From 2008 to 2018, the increase in the number of people living in extreme poverty (109%) outpaced the growth of the total population (44%), reversing some of the gains made earlier, in the 2000s. In Madagascar, the population has been growing at a rate of about 3% per year for several decades, and the country remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than 70% of its people living below the international poverty line.

Human capital formation

The returns of investing in young people's human capital are manifold, generating virtuous cycles that can lift individuals, families and societies out of poverty, reduce inequality, and help build more resilient and peaceful societies. Nevertheless, many low-income countries lack the institutions, resources and macroeconomic policies necessary to make the necessary investments in their young people. In countries with large and rapidly growing numbers of young people entering the labor force, the scarcity of decent work may compel some to migrate in search of better opportunities. Minimizing the adverse drivers and structural factors that induce young people to leave their countries would help to make migration safe, orderly and regular in accordance with target 10.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals.⁷

Education is one of the most important investments that a country can make to promote sustainable development. Education enhances human capital, promotes faster economic growth and greater productivity, advances gender equality and improves health outcomes. Providing greater educational opportunities, particularly for girls and women, can help ease demographic pressures related to rapid population growth. Better educated women tend to marry at a later age and to have fewer children. They also tend to have greater control over reproductive decision-making.

Yet, in spite of the well-established social and economic returns to education, a quarter of a billion children, adolescents and youths in 2023 did not have access to education worldwide.⁸ The overwhelming majority of these young people live in low-income countries with rapidly growing numbers of children and youths, presenting a significant challenge. In sub-Saharan Africa, despite robust gains in school enrolment percentages in recent decades, the number of children who are not in school has remained largely unchanged owing to continued population growth. Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa lag behind in key education indicators, including pupil-to-teacher ratios, proportion of adequately trained teachers, and government funding per student in primary or secondary education. In addition, many of these countries struggle to provide adequate school infrastructure, including basic resources such as drinking water, electricity, computers and access to the Internet. In the coming decades, as the share of the school-age population becomes increasingly clustered in countries with limited resources, a significant increase in public expenditures will be required just to maintain current levels of funding per student.

As shown in [Chart 7](#), it is projected that, in the least developed

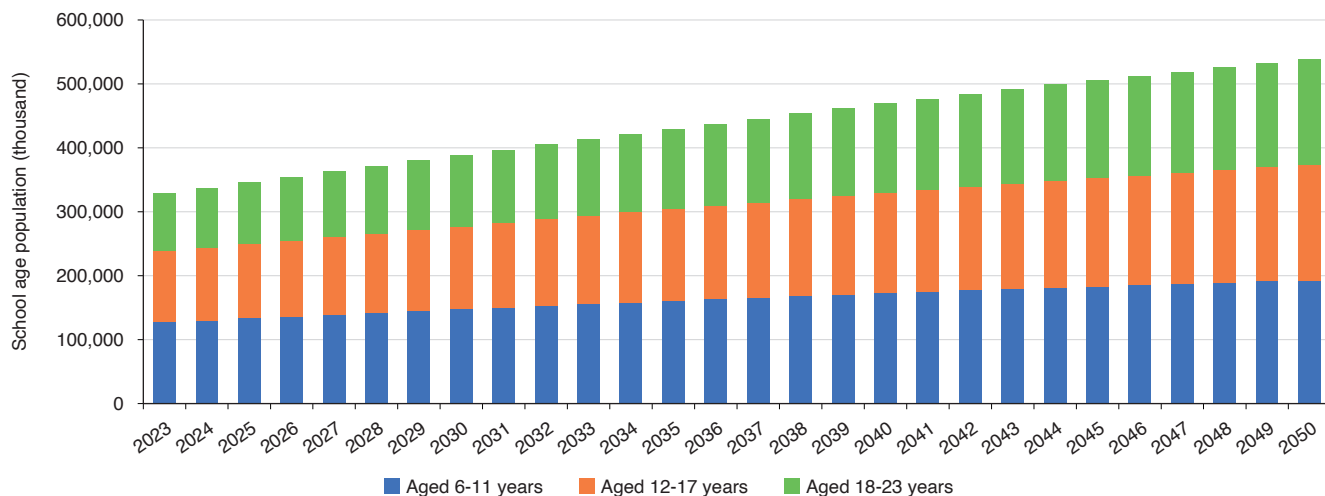
6 International Monetary Fund (2015). How Can Sub-Saharan Africa Harness the Demographic Dividend? *Regional Economic Outlook, April 2015, Sub-Saharan Africa*. International Monetary Fund. Washington, D.C.: pp. 25-45.

7 Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.

8 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1140882>

CHART 7

Projected school-age population in least developed countries in Africa, 2023-2050



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022*. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

countries in Africa, the population aged 6-11 years, corresponding to children in primary education, and 12-17 years, corresponding to those in secondary education, will increase from 128 and 110 million in 2023 to 193 and 180 million in 2050, respectively. Governments need to prioritize their investments in human capital formation not only by improving both the enrolment and completion rates and quality of education, but also by promoting and enhancing technical and vocational education and training, tertiary education, and upskilling and reskilling of existing workforces in anticipation of adapting to the future world of work.⁹

Access to reproductive health-care services

Increased access to high-quality reproductive healthcare services and safe and effective methods of family planning make a direct contribution to the exercise of reproductive rights and is likely to lead to a fertility decline, which in turn helps to accelerate economic and social development in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The use of modern contraceptive methods in sub-Saharan Africa remains lower than in other regions, and the proportion of women who have their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods (SDG indicator 3.7.1) continues to be among the lowest in the world, at 56%.

But an encouraging sign is that this indicator has increased faster than in any other region of the world, more than doubling since 1990. Eight of the 10 countries that experienced the largest increase in the use of modern methods among women with a need for family planning from 1990 to 2021 are in sub-Saharan Africa: Ethiopia, Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia. Yet, among 41 countries where still less than half of women who want to avoid pregnancy are using modern methods, 22 countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Population aging

Population aging in Africa is projected to be an increasingly important challenge by the mid-century as life expectancy continues to rise. The number of older persons in both Africa and sub-Saharan Africa will almost triple between 2022 and 2050 to 142.3 million and 100.4 million, respectively. Ethiopia alone is expected to have more than 10 million older persons by 2050. All the countries in the region should plan ahead and develop universal, adequate and sustainable social security systems. Also, the growing population of older persons will benefit from investments in health care, adult learning and education.¹⁰

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⁹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2021). *Global Population Growth and Sustainable Development*. UN DESA/POP/2021/TR/NO. 2. Available at: www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/global-population-growth

¹⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2023). Commission on Population and Development, fifty-sixth session: Ten key messages. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/>