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# The State of Urbanization, Demographic Changes, and Family Dynamics in Africa<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Rapid urbanization and population growth in Africa, coupled with the complex interplay between changing demographics, have resulted in significant implications for families. Using secondary sources, this desk review explores macro-level population dynamics and demographic shifts surrounding family size, intergenerational solidarity, housing, care for the elderly, marital relationships, declining marriage rates, and rising divorce rates. It draws from the demographic transition theory to underscore the impact of social and cultural factors on fertility rates and family dynamics. This article further underscores the significance of these dynamics in the context of North African societies and the broader African continent, offering insights into the evolving role of families and their unique challenges. It then discusses the missed opportunities associated with the demographic dividend and youth bulge and the measures necessary to unlock the region's full potential for sustainable economic growth and social development. The article concludes with policy recommendations for strategic development planning, investments in human capital, rural development, and research to navigate the complex connections between urbanization, demographics, and family dynamics.

**Keywords:** rapid urbanization, demography, population, fertility, families, North Africa

**Résumé :** L'urbanisation rapide et la croissance démographique en Afrique, en plus d'une interaction complexe entre l'évolution démographique, ont eu des conséquences importantes pour les familles. À l'aide de sources secondaires, cette étude documentaire explore la dynamique démographique au niveau macro et les changements démographiques concernant la taille de la famille, la solidarité intergénérationnelle, le logement, les soins aux personnes âgées, les relations conjugales, la baisse des taux de nuptialité et la hausse des taux de divorce. Il s'inspire de la

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théorie de la transition démographique pour souligner l'impact des facteurs sociaux et culturels sur les taux de fécondité et la dynamique familiale. Cet article souligne également l'importance de ces dynamiques dans le contexte des sociétés d'Afrique du Nord et du continent africain au sens large, offrant un aperçu de l'évolution du rôle des familles et de leurs défis uniques. Il discute ensuite des opportunités manquées associées au dividende démographique et à l'explosion démographique de la jeunesse, ainsi que des mesures nécessaires pour libérer tout le potentiel de la région en matière de croissance économique durable et de développement social. L'article se termine par des recommandations politiques pour la planification stratégique du développement, les investissements dans le capital humain, le développement rural et la recherche pour naviguer dans les liens complexes entre l'urbanisation, la démographie et la dynamique familiale.

**Mots-clés :** urbanisation rapide, démographie, population, fertilité, familles, Afrique du Nord

## Introduction

In the absence of a universally accepted definition of “urban,” (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Sahel West Africa Club [OECD/SWAC], 2020; Trask, 2022) urbanization can be loosely described as the gradual increase in the proportion of people living in relatively more developed urban settlements such as towns, cities, agglomerations, and metropolitan regions (Sanyaolu & Sanyaolu, 2018; OCED/SWAC, 2020). Urbanization can occur due to increases in the total areas occupied by urban settlements due to the administrative re-classification of rural areas as urban or the transforming of the built environment that converts formerly rural settlement into urban (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2018). Urbanization is also associated with the increase in the proportion of the population living in urban areas (Trask, 2022). In another vein, the demographic transition theory proposed by Caldwell (1976) posits that urban areas may experience significant population growth due to improved survival rates to reproductive age, better healthcare access, and reduced mortality rates, all contributing to overall population growth. Fundamentally, therefore, urbanization can be described as “a process that alters landscapes and shifts populations from rural areas to urban ones” (Trask, 2022, p. 55), with one of its major consequences being “a rise in the number, land area and population size of urban settlements and in the number and share of urban residents compared to rural dwellers” (UNDESA, 2018, p. 3).

This foregoing may partly explain the historical view of urban areas as sites of significant economic and social development as reflected in, among others, their relatively higher levels of literacy and education, better health, lower fertility, longer life expectancy, greater access to social services and enhanced opportunities for cultural and political participation (UNDESA, 2014; UNDESA, 2018). Dumont (2017), for example, highlights how the onset of Africa's demographic transition has coincided with a surge in urbanization. According to Dumont, as cities transition into the urban demographic phase, they combine an increased

migratory influx with a fundamentally new phenomenon: sustained natural population growth. This rapid growth affects all family members, ultimately influencing their access to quality housing, healthcare, quality education, social services, and public infrastructure. This is largely because urbanization is typically accompanied by changes in how individuals and families live, by increased economic activities, and entails access to new types of lifestyles and cultures (Trask, 2022). To this end, as its economic and territorial counterparts, urbanization can be seen as social process that “transforms societal organizations, the role of the family, demographic structures, the nature of work, and the way we choose to live and with whom. It also modifies domestic roles and relations within the family and redefines concepts of individual and social responsibility (Marriage and Family Encyclopedia, 2023). Indeed, available evidence shows that if well-planned and managed urban areas can present opportunities that have important social value such as lifting families out of poverty, liberating women from gender-based discrimination, enhancer the human capital and other development assets for children and youth, and offer comfort and supports to older people in their golden years (United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UN-Habitat], 2020).

As such, to address these complexities, the need to bolster the well-being of families in urban areas has been underscored at various international and regional levels. For example, Goal 11 of the United Nations Agenda 2030 is to make “cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” In Africa the Social Policy Framework for Africa (African Union, 2008) has called on governments in the continent to, among other things, improve the availability of affordable and adequate shelter for all and to facilitate family home ownership. Adequate response to these calls will require efficient resource allocation, particularly given the limited budgets and infrastructure constraints that many African countries face. This paper highlights plausible opportunities as well as policy recommendations that can lead to the achievement of these ideals. To do this, the paper begins with a macro-level overview of demographic trends and urbanization dynamics in Africa, followed by an exploration of potential repercussions of these trends on family dynamics and social structures, including fertility and family size, intergenerational solidarity, housing, elderly care, marital relationships, declining marriage rates, and increasing divorce rates.

## **An Overview of Urbanization Trends in Africa**

In 1950, Africa was essentially an agrarian rural continent with only eight countries having a level of urbanization above 20 per cent, only two cities with over 1 million inhabitants and with 26 of 55 countries having a level of urbanization less than 10 percent (OECD/SWAC, 2020, p. 41). In the last three decades, however, Africa as a whole has witnessed notable increases in urbanization. In Sub-Saharan Africa for example, the share of the population living in urban areas increased from 142.13 million in 1990 to 494.08 million in 2021. The corresponding figures for the Middle East and North Africa were 140.07 and 319.93 (Ritchie & Roser, 2018). These figures indicate that more than half of Africa’s

population reside in urban areas, and this is projected to increase to over 1.3 billion by 2050 (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2023). Within the continent, North Africa is as the most urbanized region, with 78 per cent of its population living in urban areas and countries such as Egypt and Libya having the highest urbanization rates at 93 per cent and 81 percent, respectively (OECD/SWAC, 2020).

Furthermore, while it currently has one of the lowest levels of urbanization globally, Africa is poised to maintain its position as the world's fastest-growing urban region, with projections that the continent's population will double by 2050, thus surpassing initial projections (Wall et al., 2018). Two-thirds of this expansion will occur within urban areas (Wall et al., 2018) with projections that Africa's urban areas will welcome an additional 950 million residents over the next 30 years (OECD/SWAC, 2020). Much of the projected urban growth is expected to occur in intermediate and small cities, rather than megacities like Lagos or Cairo (Awumbila, 2017). Given that they are emerging as the epicenters for urban growth and development, the focus of rapid urbanization management in Africa needs to be directed towards intermediate-sized and smaller cities rather than on primary and megacities as is currently the case (Githira et al., 2020). These findings note that although there has been an assumption that progress in these larger urban areas will trickle down to smaller cities, this approach has led to widening gaps in physical and socio-economic disparities between primary and secondary urban centers. These disparities disproportionately affect families who bear the brunt of the inequalities and lack of opportunities in secondary towns and cities.

The impact on families can be linked to some of the key factors that underlie the continent's high rates of urbanization such as large-scale rural-urban migration and natural population growth. A youthful population, which is expected to double by 2050, is also a key factor driving this rapid urbanization, with 70 per cent population in urban areas comprising young people seeking education, employment, and better living standards (UNFPA, 2023). Taken together, these factors have led to the emergence of slums and other forms of informal housing that are characterized by overcrowding, homelessness, and limited access to basic services, with the influx of people into cities outpacing the capacity to provide affordable housing (UN-Habitat, 2018). The ongoing migration of rural populations into urban areas further exacerbates poverty and intensifies social inequality. The strain on infrastructure and public services results in insufficient access to housing, clean water, electricity, sanitation, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities for individuals living in poverty, significantly impacting families and their quality of life (Githira et al., 2020).

Scholars also argue that the combination of excessive urbanization and underdevelopment creates a situation where the job market and the economy cannot keep pace with urban population growth, potentially leading to urban violence and instability (Goldstone, 2002). Changing demographic patterns in urban centers are identified as destabilizing factors, suggesting that urban groups may have

a weaker attachment to the city as their “homeland” compared to rural settings (Toft, 2003). The challenges posed by population growth are further intensified by land use transformations and inadequate infrastructure, potentially increasing the likelihood of urban unrest, and lowering the quality of life for families (Gizelis et al., 2021). It is to this end that in Africa—where the family plays a central role in society and serves as the foundation for nurturing new generations—scholars have expressed concern over rapid urbanization and its impact on African families (Montgomery et al., 2013).

Migration from rural to urban areas, which plays a significant role in the African urbanization process (Teye, 2018, p. 5) has particularly been associated with many of the family implications of urbanization. It has been, argued, for example that such migration often leads to the urban family dynamics such as weakened family bonds and networks, disrupted traditional family patterns, and he reshaped dynamics between extended and nuclear families (Tacoli, 1998). As Goode (1963) asserted, such shifts typically influence cultural norms, values, and traditions related to family life, potentially leading to changes in how families function and the roles they play within the larger community (p.6). Indeed, available evidence suggests that the combination of population growth and urbanization poses complex challenges that affect various aspects of family dynamics and social structures, including fertility and family size, intergenerational solidarity, familial co-residence, elderly care, marital relationships, and changes in nuptiality patterns, all of which are briefly discussed in the following section.

### **Fertility and Family Size**

Urbanization has been linked to lower fertility rates in families residing in cities, as evidenced by numerous scholarly works on urbanization and social dynamics. For example, the demographic transition theory would suggest that urbanization contributes to reduction in child mortality rates as urban dwellers have better access to health services and overall economic and social development reflected in, among other things, including better access to educational opportunities, better employment opportunities for women, enhanced gender equality and better access to all types of services. (Caldwell, 1976; Martine et al., 2013; Teye, 2018). This, in line with the tenets of the demographic transition model, which posits that as cities expand and industrialization progresses, families in urban areas may opt for smaller families which can eventually lead to smaller household size. In some low to middle-income countries like Egypt, governmental family planning policies aimed at reducing family size have prompted the construction of subsidized housing units with dimensions typically ranging from 60 to 80 square meters. Such urbanization can influence fertility rates, as the provision of smaller housing units can encourage reduced family sizes (Rabier, 2021). Thus, while “others have dis-agreed with this perception, alleging that the impacts of urbanization on fertility are inconsequential” (Martine et al., 2013, p. 5), in Africa “there is enough evidence to suggest that urbanization is contributing to a reduction in total fertility rates” (Teye, 2018, p. 5) given that numerous studies over the last three decades

have consistently shown that women of reproductive age who reside in urban areas have fewer children relative to their rural counterparts (see, for example, Brockerhoff & Yang, 1994; Shapiro & Tambashe, 1999; Bongaarts, 2001; Shapiro & Gebreselassie, 2008; Martine et al., 2013; Flückiger & Ludwig, 2017; Schoumaker & Sánchez-Páez, 2020). In the same vein, drawing on data from 67 Demographic and Health Surveys (conducted between 2000 and 2009) covering 30 sub-Saharan African countries and focused on men aged 50–64 years old, researchers concluded:

There is a widening of the gap between the areas, with urban fertility declining faster than rural. Urban cohort fertility decreased from around nine children ever born in the early 1990s to slightly above six in recent years. Over the same period, rural fertility declined on average by 1.5 children from 9.4 (Menashe-Oren & Sánchez-Páez, 2023, p. 11).

### **Intergenerational Solidarity**

The family serves as the most important setting for strengthening and investing in the well-being of future generations and safeguarding cultural heritage. The solidarity between generations not only enhances the functionality of the family, but also contributes to the overall development of the community (Viscogliosi et al., 2020). As such, grandparents play a vital role in this by acting as both preservers and conveyors of culture, identity, and values to the younger generation. However, extended kinship ties, which commonly characterize traditional societies in Africa, often weaken or decline as urbanization increases as individuals or families migrate from rural areas to pursue better economic opportunities, employment, or education. As the convergence hypothesis notes:

Wherever the economic system expands through industrialization, family patterns change. Extended kinship ties weaken, lineage patterns dissolve, and a trend toward some form of the conjugal system generally begins to appear—that is, the nuclear family becomes more of an independent kinship unit. (Goode, 1963, p. 6)

This shift away from extended family networks in Africa, that come with increased urbanization, has the potential to fundamentally alter how culture is preserved and values are passed down. According to Makiwane & Kaunda (2018), in urbanized settings, the traditional role of grandparents as guardians of cultural heritage may face greater challenges due to factors like geographical separation and the demands of modern lifestyles.

### **Familial Co-Residence**

In Africa, the practice of extended family co-residence played in pivotal role in not only reinforcing intergenerational connections but also fostering communal solidarity, providing substantial social support, enhancing the overall quality of life through increased support, resource-sharing opportunities, and familial empowerment (Aref & Khodr, 2022). It can be argued that the co-residence of

extended families fosters a profound sense of togetherness, thereby contributing to the overall sustainability of communities. In contemporary Africa however, the capacity of families to provide traditional reciprocal and intergenerational care and support for their members in urban settings is significantly hampered by factors such as congested housing. As alluded to earlier, in some parts of the continent urbanizations facilitate the construction of small houses that are inadequate for enhanced family living and, indeed, are misaligned with the African traditional system of co-residence (Mokomane, 2014). It is esteemed that three quarters of Africa's urban residents live in slums and other sub-standard types of housing with very poor and insecure living conditions that have several negative implications for family well-being including inadequate health care facilities which, coupled with the poor living conditions, increases sickness and death rates, high levels of unemployment and underemployment, family poverty, gender-based violence substance abuse etc. (Martine et al., 2013; Teye, 2018).

### **Ageing Populations**

In 2016, the United Nations stated that “the number of older persons in sub-Saharan Africa has doubled since 1990 and is projected to more than triple between 2015 and 2050” (UNDESA, 2016, p. 1). Similarly, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—where the proportion of older people aged 65 years and above is currently estimated at 4.7 per cent—is expected to “undergo marked changes from 2025, with those aged above sixty-four years representing the largest age group by 2050” (Abyad 2021, p. 112). Recent estimates are that indeed, in contrast to other world regions, Africa continues to boast a conspicuously youthful population, where merely 5.6 per cent of its residents were aged 60 years or older in 2020, in stark contrast to, for example, North America's 23.4 per cent (He, 2019). He observes that even by 2050, the percentage of elderly individuals in Africa is projected to remain in single digits at 9.3 per cent. In absolute numbers, however, Africa still hosts a significant number of older adults. For example, as of 2019, 18 African countries had a population of over 1 million people aged 60 years and above (He, 2019). In this context, older people in Africa have transitioned from being integral members with economic activities centered around them to assume the role of economic dependents within their children's households (Apt, 1995, p. 156). Apt (2001) also notes that this ongoing shift is partly attributed to the evolving family structure in Africa, which is progressively transitioning from extended to nuclear, particularly in urban areas. Thus, urbanization plays a prominent role in African social transformation, including the shrinkage of family roles in caring for older people and the flight from extended family structures (Aref & Khodr, 2022).

The ageing population in Africa presents several challenges, including those related to healthcare, social support, poverty, and social isolation. In African urban areas, these challenges are exacerbated by limitations and/or strains in existing infrastructure and resources. The housing situation in many urban African areas, as discussed above, has important implications for the health and



social care as well as intergenerational support for older people across the continent. Furthermore, as populations increasingly migrate from rural to urban areas, the scarcity of extended family care is also likely to emerge in rural areas due to increased physical separation that hinders the conventional family support system for the elderly. This shift towards greater geographical distances has the potential to disrupt the traditional support system for the older people across Africa, necessitating alternative forms of care and support to accommodate the evolving dynamics of urbanized societies (El-Taweel, 2022).

### **Marital Relationships**

The serious impact of marital conflict on the functioning and sustainability of the family, its members and society at large is well-documented. In many traditional African societies, marital conflict resolution is settled through extended family structures (Spaumer, 2017; Umubyeyi et al., 2020) typically in the spirit of togetherness where “conflicts are seen in their social contexts. They are not seen as isolated events and . . . during mediation not only are the consequences for the parties looked at but also the consequences for others in their families. [Thus] the traditional objectives of African mediation are to soothe hurt feelings and to reach a compromise that can improve future relationships” (Boniface, 2012, p. 382). In a 2023 empirical study conducted by the Doha International Family Institute (DIFI) across 19 Arab countries, positive and harmonious interactions between extended and nuclear families during the initial five years of marriage were identified. In this study, a representative sample of 1,184 recently married couples from Arab and North African countries demonstrated that 30 per cent per cent acknowledged the favorable involvement of fathers, mothers, and in-laws in addressing marital disputes, with 18 per cent of respondents attested to receiving financial support from their families. Additionally, 22 per cent and 23 per cent of participants, respectively, affirmed the contributions of their extended families in raising their children and providing care, particularly during a mother’s illness. This research ultimately found that newlywed couples perceive a constructive role played by their parents and in-laws in the resolution of marital conflicts (DIFI, 2023).

This research also suggests that family support and involvement are generally seen as constructive and beneficial for resolving marital conflicts. It also underlines the important role that extended families play in childcare and caregiving. Still, urbanization can have several consequences on marital relationships, as it brings about significant changes in societal and family dynamics, including reduced family support. As extended families may not reside in proximity in urban settings, the support and guidance that they traditionally provide to newlyweds may be limited. This may place pressure on marital relationships as couples have to navigate various challenges without the extensive family support they might have had in rural areas.

## Changes in Nuptiality Patterns

Another significant demographic shift affecting families in Africa is the changing landscape of nuptiality patterns. For example, in many North African countries, urbanization has been identified as a contributing factor to the notable decrease in marriage rates and increasing divorce rates. Egypt's legal reforms implemented in 2000, notably the introduction of the "khula" law granting women the right to no-fault divorce, have been associated with the surge in divorces in urban areas (Mendoza et al., 2020). Egypt has also experienced an 83 percent increase in divorce rates between 1996 and 2017, with approximately 200,000 married couples divorcing annually (Reda, 2019). Additional findings reveal that 40 percent of marriages end within the initial five years, and divorce rates can vary between 39.3 per cent and 60.7 percent, depending on whether the location is rural or urban (Mendoza et al., 2020). Further data highlights a significant drop in the nation's marriage rate, plummeting from 927,844 marriages in 2019 to 880,041 in 2020, with approximately 60 percent of young people expressing hesitancy to marry due to concerns related to Egypt's overarching political, economic, and security circumstances (Al-Din, 2022).

## Conclusion

At its core, urbanization is a transformative process that reshapes landscapes and relocates populations from rural to urban areas (Trask, 2022). While urbanization can pose complex challenges for social, economic, political, and environmental development as well as for families, it presents many opportunities for development. In Africa, the projected increase in the working-age population and a prominent youth bulge in the coming decades—where an estimated 450 million individuals are projected to be added to Africa's working-age population by 2050 (Page, 2019)—present unique opportunities for African countries to leverage their changing age structure for sustainable economic development if this 'demographic dividend' is effectively harnessed.

The concept of the demographic dividend pertains to the economic growth potential resulting from shifts in a population's age structure, particularly when the working-age population (those aged 15 to 64) surpasses the dependent population. It suggests that investments in education and empowerment, particularly during adolescence, can yield long-lasting benefits (Weny et al., 2017; El Ouassif, 2021). According to Weny and colleagues, when these investments are widespread and align with a youthful population, they result in a larger proportion of the population with improved health and education entering their most productive years, which, in turn, has the potential to drive accelerated development. Thus, while there are arguments that sub-Saharan Africa's relatively high fertility rates may be a drag on development that will only see the region enjoying a demographic dividend after mid-century (Cilliers, 2021), there is also a general consensus that Africa can unlock the full potential of this demographic

opportunity by addressing current challenges such as limited access to quality education as well as those found in the continent's urban areas such as limited employment opportunities, economic uncertainties, poor infrastructure and issues brought about by rural-urban (Githira et al., 2020; Cilliers, 2021). The continent's predominantly youthful population, with the majority currently being under the age of 25 years means a larger labor force is available for productive activities with the potential to lead to heightened economic savings as well as increased investment, productivity, and consumer demand.

Well-planned and well-managed, family friendly cities also have the potential to uplift families from poverty and provide a promising future for children and youth. Although the concept of "family-friendly cities" is still new and hence lacks a standard definition, it broadly refers to an urban area of cities with physical and non-physical factors that have been intentionally designed to contributing to the family's well-being in the city, such as family's access to economic capital, family-friendly transportation, affordable and good child care services; green spaces; affordable housing; safety, and other family-friendly strengths like parks and other recreational facilities, improved accessibility and mobility, enhanced public order (Drianda, 2018; Renn, 2019). Considering current trends such as the shifting roles of modern parents and different characteristics of millennial families, cities with proper development plans have the potential to act as a catalyst for enhancing social outcomes and improving the lives of African families.

It is also noteworthy that an overemphasis on urban development strategies at the expense of rural areas exacerbates aspirations to migrate to urban areas. For example, a recent study by El Ouassif (2021), revealed that in Africa and the Middle East youth migration and brain drain are exacerbated by high youth unemployment, widespread poverty, and inequality, which, coupled with a lack of quality job opportunities and difficulties in absorbing the growing youth population, drive increasing rural-urban migration as well as permanent migration abroad. To this end, El Ouassif (2021) suggests that investment in sensitive sectors can deter early migration by offering young people opportunities for employment and skill development within their rural origins and home countries. Essentially, there is a critical need to enhance the quality of life in rural regions through improved infrastructure, education, healthcare, transportation, and career opportunities.

In summary, the key takeaway from this paper is that while rapid urbanization presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for families and future generations to adapt and create innovative strategies for safeguarding their cultural heritage, identity, and values, highlighting the importance of cultural preservation and the continuity of intergenerational bonds. It is thus crucial in the post-2024 era for African governments to support the development and effective implementation of policies and interventions that consider the unique social, economic, and cultural contexts of African urban areas and prioritize the well-being of families and communities (Montgomery et al., 2013). These include

national development agendas that have the preservation and utilization of traditional Africa family systems at their core. Driving these policies and interventions should be robust evidence and data derived for context-specific and culturally relevant research aimed at enhancing the well-being of families and their members in different parts of Africa, while taking into consideration the unique social, economic, and cultural contexts of African urban areas. By taking a holistic approach, African countries can navigate the complexities of urbanization and create a sustainable future for their populations.

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## ■ The State of Urbanization, Demographic Changes

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