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FOSTERING STRONG, TRANSPARENT INSTITUTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: THE ROLE OF FAMILY PLANNING

Median age—the age at which half the population is younger and half is older—predicts social and political stability.

Family planning contributes to the shift in age structure from a youthful population to a more mature population, helping to lay the foundation for social and political stability.

When countries reach a median age of 29, their chance of being assessed as a liberal democracy is greater than 50 percent.

*This policy brief is distilled from a report released in 2016 by Population Reference Bureau (PRB), entitled *Fostering Economic Growth, Equity, and Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of Family Planning*, by Ishrat Husain, Kaitlyn Patierno, Inday Zosa-Feranil, and Rhonda Smith.*

The quality of public institutions directly affects economic growth. The World Economic Forum (WEF) identifies institutional quality as the first of 12 pillars of global competitiveness and calculates it based on factors including property rights, ethics and corruption, judicial independence, government efficiency, and security.¹ Accountability, transparency, and protection of economic and financial rights within the institutional environment are all hallmarks of democracies and promote the process of economic development.

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) scores lowest among seven major world regions in WEF rankings of the quality of public institutions. While it scores ahead of some other regions in efficiency of the legal framework, low regulatory burden, and low wastefulness of government spending, SSA fares poorly in measures of diversion of public funds, favoritism, and irregular payments.²

Governing institutions must deliver services efficiently and fairly to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of citizens. Effective functioning of public institutions becomes much more challenging in countries with youthful age structures, where governments are overwhelmed

and institutions are stressed in their ability to provide economic opportunities and absorb youth into the labor force. Youth can become disillusioned and feel marginalized when they can't access services or jobs, leaving them susceptible to recruitment into violent or extremist groups.

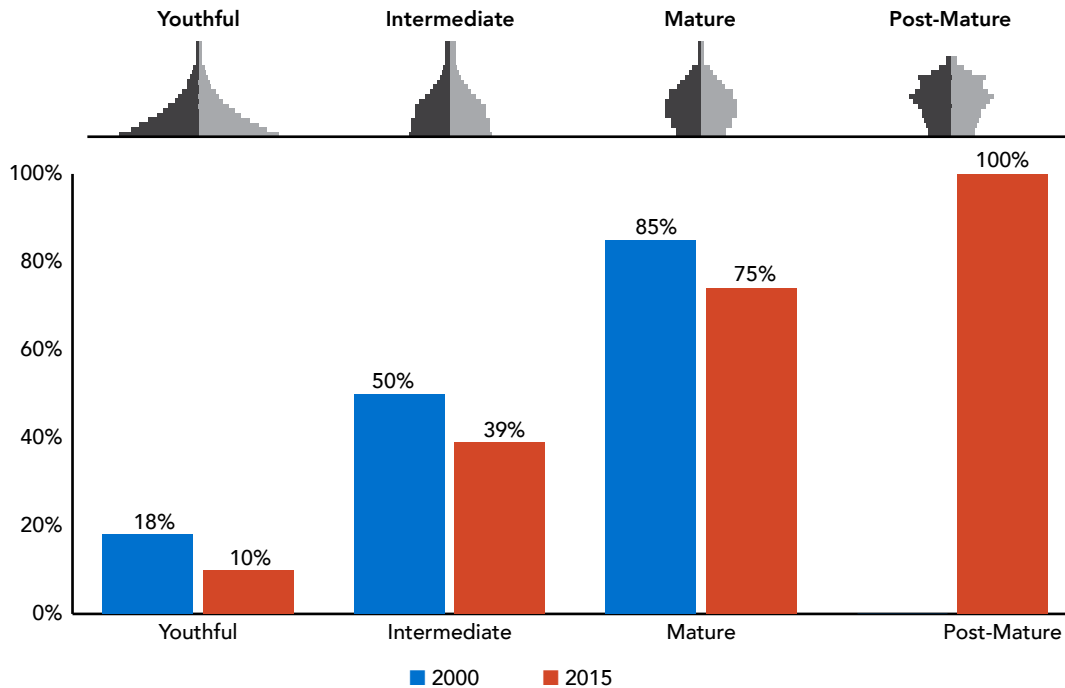
Population Age Structure Affects Democracy and Stability

Research shows that median age—the age at which half the population is younger and half is older—predicts social and political stability.³ Analysis of hundreds of countries finds that attaining and sustaining high levels of political rights and civil liberties (liberal democracy) is much less likely in countries with a youthful age structure compared to countries with a more mature age structure (see Figure 1, page 2).⁴ The younger the population, the greater the risk of experiencing civil conflict; the more mature the age structure, the more peaceful and more likely to attain liberal democracy and retain it. Statistical analyses conclude that:

- Countries with a **median age of less than 20 years** are the most vulnerable to low-intensity civil and ethnic conflict and state-sponsored violence. When any of these states have achieved political stability, it has typically been under an authoritarian regime.⁵
- Countries **at or below a median age of 26 years** infrequently achieve liberal democracy. When they do, most devolve to

FIGURE 1

Percent of Countries in Each Age Structure That Are Liberal Democracies



Note: In 2000, no countries were in the post-mature category. In 2015, three countries—Japan, Germany, and Italy—all liberal democracies, had post-mature age structures.

Source: Richard Cincotta, "Who's Next? Age Structure and the Prospects of Democracy in North Africa and the Middle East." in *Population Change in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa: Beyond the Demographic Divide*, Christiane Timmerman, ed., London: Ashgate, 2015.

partial democracy or autocracy within 10 years. Since the 1970s, about half of youthful countries that reverted to less democratic governance also experienced political violence during the decline.

- When countries reach **a median age of 29**, their chance of being assessed as a liberal democracy is greater than 50 percent. Democratic transitions occurred in states near this median age during the 1970s (Portugal, Greece, Spain) and more recently (South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, and Tunisia). The probability of achieving liberal democracy increases as age structures mature. Furthermore, countries with this age structure profile typically have relatively high levels of educational attainment and have achieved middle-income status.⁶

Further declines in fertility may be necessary to achieve and maintain high levels of democracy in SSA. In countries with a youthful age structure, at least half of the population is younger than age 25. In SSA, the average median age is 18 years, and only four countries—three of which are small island states—have a median age above 25 (see Figure 2,

page 3). If fertility rates decline from an average of 5.1 children per woman in 2010-2015 to 3.2 children per woman in 2045-2050, more than 20 countries in SSA would have a median age above 25 by 2050, opening opportunities for greater stability and democracy.⁷

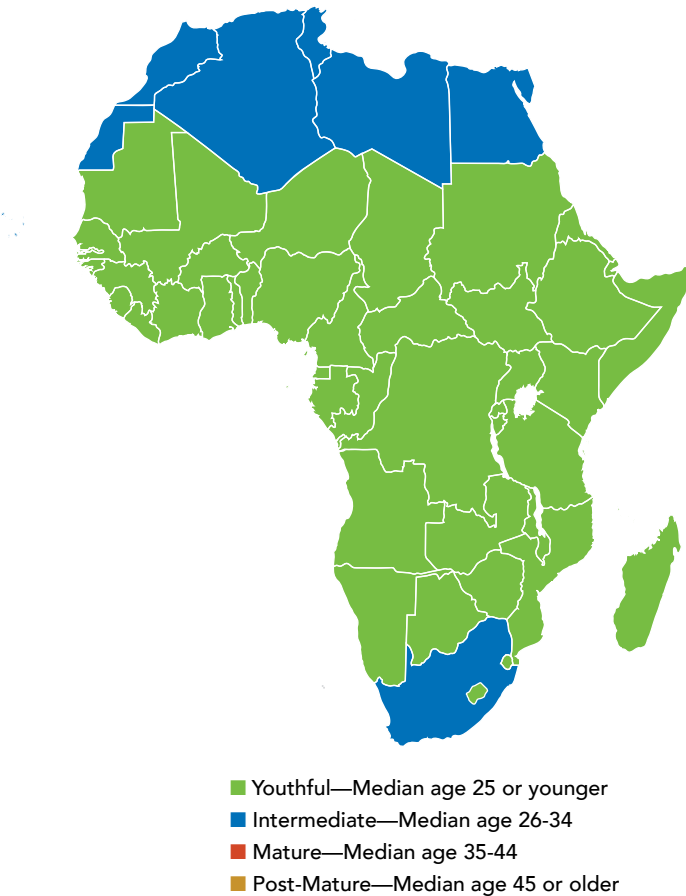
Recommended Actions

Include demographic trends as an integral component of development strategies and plans.

Incorporating population age structure and its pathways for change into development planning can improve competitiveness and reduce vulnerability to economic and political shocks—leaving a country better prepared for the future. Effective development policies and programs must urgently address the current needs of the population, which is largely youthful in most SSA countries, to improve young people's economic prospects and mitigate the risk of civil conflict. Regional institutions and development partners can also use age structure analyses as a planning tool to identify countries with political risk and potential.

FIGURE 2

Age Structures in Africa, 2015



Source: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*.

Promote voluntary family planning to improve individual well-being and facilitate national development.

Voluntary family planning programs contribute to building democratic institutions by allowing women and couples to have the spacing and number of children they desire, thus reducing fertility and creating a more mature age structure. This translates to diminished pressure on the job market and fewer unemployed and underemployed youth, enabling an environment more conducive to cultivating strong democracies. Family planning directly contributes to smaller family size and to the shift in age structure from a youthful population to a more mature population, thus helping to lay the foundation for social and political stability—a cornerstone of robust national institutions. Strong voluntary family planning programs that reach marginalized minorities with quality services can also help reduce disparities in access within countries.

References

- 1 World Economic Forum, *Global Competitiveness Report 2014-2015* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014).
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- 5 Henrik Urdal, "Youth Bulges and Violence," in *Political Demography: How Population Changes Are Reshaping Security and National Politics*, ed. J.A. Goldstone, E. Kaufmann, and M.D. Toft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Henrik Urdal, "A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2006): 607-29.
- 6 Cincotta, "Who's Next?"
- 7 United Nations Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision* (New York: United Nations Population Division, 2017).



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