

# Why addressing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy is essential

to achieving the demographic dividend in West and Central Africa



The West and Central Africa region<sup>1</sup> has 506.4 million people thus accounting for about 43 per cent of Africa's population. With current trends, the population is expected to increase to 756.2 million people by 2030.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the population of West and Central Africa is predominantly young. More than 64 per cent are under the age of 24. These young people are a tremendous resource for the region but they face considerable challenges in terms of their health, education, employment and empowerment.

Women and girls, in particular, in West and Central Africa are vulnerable to a disproportionate range of risks, particularly to their sexual and reproductive health. Girls are subject to child marriage, female genital mutilation and limited education and as such, are denied equality of opportunities. At the beginning of 2016, the African Union Heads of State and Government underlined a commitment to put young

people and women first by agreeing to focus on “Harnessing the demographic dividend through investments in youth” throughout 2017 and beyond.<sup>3</sup> UNFPA in West and Central Africa recognizes the critical importance of investing in adolescents and youth, particularly adolescent girls. The key to achieving the demographic dividend is enabling young people- and especially adolescent girls - to reach their potential.

1. Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, the Gambia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome et Principe; Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. For some data in this document, the Democratic Republic of Congo is included.
2. United Nations World Population Prospects, accessed at <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>. July 24, 2017
3. Africa Union Assembly Decision (Assembly/AU/Dec.601 (XXVI) of January 2016.



## The demographic dividend

The demographic dividend is the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population is larger than the non-working-age share of the population. With more people in the labor force and fewer children to support, a country has a window of opportunity for rapid economic growth if the right social and economic investments and policies are made in health, education, governance, and the economy.

Changes in the population structure and the dependency ratio are necessary for harnessing the demographic dividend.

In order for this to happen a country must first undergo a demographic transition, which means a shift from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality. This creates a working-age population that is larger than the dependent generations both preceding and following it. When there is a rise in the proportion of the population of working age, there is a fall in what is called the 'dependency ratio'. It is defined as the ratio of the

elderly (ages 65 and older) plus the young (under age 15) to the population in the working ages (ages 15 to 64). The dependency ratio is high in the region (87.2 %) because of the burden of youth dependency due to a long history of high fertility.

The demographic dividend has also been described as a demographic bonus or a demographic window of opportunity. The key word here is opportunity—economic growth is not a given. In order to realize a lasting demographic dividend, governments need to implement strategic investments and prioritize development and implementation of policies and strategies in the following areas:

- family planning;
- sexual and reproductive health services to reduce maternal and child mortality;
- education particularly for girls;
- sound policies against child marriage which will assist in reducing adolescent pregnancy and in turn also decrease fertility; and
- comprehensive sexual education for young people to give them the information and skills to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health.

Between 1970 and 2000, most of the developing regions - such as East and Southeast Asia and Latin America where the demographic transition was quick - benefited from this “demographic dividend”. This transition still has not occurred in West and Central Africa, primarily because the birth rate remains high. The region has the highest birth rates in the world, averaging more than five children per woman. Studies have shown that no country has developed socio-economically without a parallel decline in birth rates. In West and Central Africa, the second phase of the demographic transition which is characterized by declining fertility is still largely in its infancy and remains very slow.

## The importance of the demographic dividend in West and Central Africa

The demographic dividend is important to West and Central Africa because of its strong population growth. The region has the highest population growth rates in the world with the majority of countries having annual growth rates above 2 per cent, implying a population “doubling time” of 20 to 30 years. **The population of young people was 6 million in 2010 and is projected to reach 10 million by 2030.** This cohort of young people can become an advantage if the number of dependents per worker is reduced through a decline in fertility. With a lower “dependency ratio”, the working population will be able to decrease their spending on children (their primary expense) and devote a larger

share of their income to savings and productive investment. In turn, this will help stimulate economic growth.

## Child marriage and adolescent fertility

Countries with some of the highest fertility rates are also those with some of the highest child marriage rates in the world. In many of these contexts, child marriage<sup>4</sup> is a driving factor for adolescent pregnancies and child-bearing and contributes to the high fertility rates. Child marriage is widespread in West and Central Africa, where 41 per cent of young women were married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and 14 per cent were married before age 15. Six of the ten countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are located in the region – Burkina Faso, Chad, Central African Republic, Guinea, Mali and, Niger.<sup>5</sup> Niger has the highest overall prevalence of child marriage in the world at a rate of 76 per cent.

**Early marriage leads to early child-bearing.** Among developing regions, West and Central Africa has the largest percentage (28 %) of women between the ages of 20 and 24 who reported a birth before age 18.<sup>6</sup>

4. Defined as a customary, religious or legal marriage of anyone under the age of 18 years.

5. UNICEF global databases, 2014, based on DHS and MICS 2005-2014.

6. Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy. UNFPA State of the World's Population 2013.

Having many pregnancies at an early age is dangerous for both mother and child, as young mothers' bodies are usually not mature enough to carry a baby. Moreover, child marriage has negative effects on girls' education and life opportunities; often such marriages put an end to girls' education.

## The impact of child marriage on the demographic dividend

The projections on child marriage in this region are still alarming. They indicate that, due to population growth, the consequences of child marriage are likely to affect an even larger number of girls in West and Central Africa in the coming years. If current rate of decline in child marriage doubles, it will bring the prevalence from 41 per cent today to 31 per cent by 2030. However, even this progress would not be sufficient to offset population growth and the number of child brides would continue to grow. If the decline continues at the current pace there will be about 11.7 million child brides by 2030. However if there is no further decline the number of child brides will continue to rise significantly and will reach about 13.5 million child brides in 2030.<sup>7</sup>

Globally, the greatest increase in pregnancy among adolescent girls under the age of 18 years is likely to happen in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>8</sup> Projections show that there will be 3 million additional adolescent births by 2030. This rapid projected increase is mainly due to high

levels of fertility combined with a large proportion of the population entering their childbearing years. More specifically, in West and Central Africa, the number of pregnancies among adolescent girls less than 18 years of age could increase by 52 per cent, from 2.7 million in 2015 to 4.1 million in 2030.<sup>9</sup>

A recent study examining the economic impact of child marriage determined that when taking into account the rate of child marriage in the country and the characteristics of the girls who marry early, ending child marriage would bring about a reduction in total fertility of 11 percent.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that ending child marriage would significantly speed up the transitions to lower fertility rates in many countries. Consequently, ending child marriage and early childbirths could reduce population growth. On average, across 15 countries of which 6 are in the Western and Central Africa region, population sizes would be 2.45 percent smaller by 2030 if all child marriages and early childbirths were ended today.<sup>11</sup>

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7. UNICEF global databases, 2017 based on DHS and MICS, 2005-2015.

8. UNFPA. Adolescent Pregnancy: A Review of the Evidence. 2013.

9. UNFPA. Facing the Facts. Adolescent girls and contraception. 2016.

10. Wodon, Quentin; Male, Chata; Nayihouba, Ada; Onagoruwa, Adenike; Savadogo, Aboudrahyme; Yedan, Ali; Edmeades, Jeff; Kes, Aslihan; John, Neetu; Murithi, Lydia; Steinhuis, Mara and Petroni, Suzanne. 2017. "Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report", Washington, DC: The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women.

11. *Ibid.*



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\* Projection estimates based on current data and trends



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## Recommendations to address child marriage

Child marriage derails a girl's future and means that she has no control over her fertility. High adolescent fertility rates and the accompanying unmet need for family planning - which is one of the reasons for high fertility - could delay or jeopardize the harnessing of the demographic dividend. A World Bank-ICRW study looking at the economic impact of child marriage also found that by 2030, ending child marriage will lead to lower population growth and would generate more than \$500 billion in benefits annually at a global level. Countries would also save on their health and education budgets.<sup>12</sup> The magnitude of the threat child marriage poses to global development is highlighted by the fact that its elimination is one of the specific targets for achieving goal number five of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals: gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

12. Petroni, Suzanne and Wodon, Quentin. Accessed at <http://www.costsofchildmarriage.org/rippling-economic-impacts-child-marriage>. July 25, 2017.

Key recommendations to address child marriage as a critical strategy to achieve the demographic dividend include:

### Generate an enabling legal and policy environment

Legislation against child marriage, and accompanying sound policies, are critical elements of comprehensive human rights approach.

### Improve girls' access to quality formal education

Education remains a powerful way to prevent child marriage. Girls' education, especially at the secondary level, is strongly associated with delays in age at marriage. Research has suggested that girls with secondary schooling are up to six times less likely to marry under the age of 18 years compared to girls with little or no education.<sup>13</sup>

### Empower girls by building their skills and enhancing their social assets

Using an empowerment approach can lead to positive outcomes for girls and their families by supporting girls to become agents of change and helping them envisage what alternative roles could look like in their communities.

Among the successful programmes are those that empower girls at risk of child marriage through, for example, life skills training, provision of safe spaces for girls to discuss their futures, provision of health and education services

for young girls, and the development of support networks. Such interventions can equip girls with knowledge and skills in areas relevant to their lives, including sexual and reproductive health and their rights under the law. It is important to also have empowerment programmes for girls already in child marriages.

### Expand access sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception, for young people

Across Africa, barriers limiting young people's access to sexual and reproductive health information and services continue to persist, particularly for young girls. Addressing unmet need for contraception among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa alone would reduce unintended pregnancies and abortions by 70 per cent, along with significant reductions in maternal death and morbidities.<sup>14</sup> Thus, access to sexual and reproductive health services, including modern contraceptives could be a life-saver for many women and adolescent girls.

**Addressing child marriage in the region will not only change the lives of millions of girls, it will provide a critical window of opportunity for harnessing Africa's demographic dividend.**

13. UNFPA. *Marrying Too Young. End Child Marriage*. 2012.

14. Guttmacher Institute. *ADDING IT UP: Costs and Benefits of Meeting the Contraceptive Needs of Adolescents In Sub-Saharan Africa*. 2016

**“The continent cannot meet its ambitious goals under Agenda 2063 while it limits a dynamic segment of its society, which women represent, from realizing its full potential. Investing in women and girls and their integration into the labor market, alongside delayed marriage and child bearing, and expanded access to education for girls, family planning, and sexual and reproductive health rights, have been attributed as the driving forces behind the economic successes of the Asian tigers.”**

AU Agenda 2063 Framework Document:  
The Africa We Want



United Nations Population Fund