Population and development in West Africa: nexuses between migration, urbanization and demographic dividend

Mamadú Cissé | CEDEPLAR, Brazil

Abstract: The debate on the political and research agenda on population and development in the African context has attracted the attention of research centers and multilateral organizations: from specialized events of institutes, universities and think tanks to political forums like UNFPA and IOM (both at UN level), African and European Union, OECD and much more. In addition, organized civil society and disciplines from various areas of the social sciences are also participants in these discussions. Thus, my intention in this brief paper is not to go deep in the subject or be exhaustive in my approach. Once an overview of relevant aspects for the debate has been drawn, namely: identifying nexuses for the discussion of issues such as human mobility, urbanization and development – it would be enough for the good conclusion of this reflection. To this end, I begin by bringing a brief review of the specialized literature on the subject, present some available evidence and data, and close with some pertinent reflections resulting from the discussions that I will carry out below.

Keywords: Demographic dividend in Africa; Migration; Population and development; Urbanization

Presentation and discussion overview **on t***he triad migration/population–urbanization–development*

The issue of migrations within the theoretical model of demographic transition was classically discussed in social sciences, from seminal works by Zelinsky (1971) to more recent contributions by Skeldon (2012): both supported the thesis of the spatial diffusion of innovation and economic development through the attraction of migratory flows between different geographic regions. This concept supports the theoretical model of the transition of mobility (migration) and follows the pattern of demographic transition, given that the latter occurs as a result of the process that goes from high to low mortality and fertility rates until both reach a point of stability/convergence.

In comparison, the first one – transition of mobility/migration – is triggered in the passage from low to high levels of development between regions of origin and destination of migrants, and the lower region tends to send emigrants to the high development region, this flow registers a peak, stabilizes and then begins to decrease until it returns to levels with zero migratory balance – being the moment when the inequality in the levels of development between two regions (origin and destination country) cancel each other out. This trend has been observed in Africa's mobility scenarios, especially in West Africa.

In Dyson (2011), links between urbanization, migrations and demographic transition are evidenced, given that the decline in mortality leads to the consequent drop in fertility and the acceleration of urbanization, which in turn will be the a driving force for more dynamic exchange systems, integration of regions, economic development and the creation of new technologies in the face of the exchange of ideas and innovations made possible by this new wave of arrangements in the spatial redistribution of the population through migration and the human capital in urban agglomerations. We will see below the unfolding, in the African scenario, of some traces of these processes described by Dyson.

Clark (2007) and Galor (2022) showed that today's modern human society transitioned from precarious conditions between the first centuries to much of the eighteenth to the nineteenth, where the human experience was marked by stagnation. This stagnation would have occurred due to the "Malthusian trap", the thesis that *short time gains* tend to be diluted and lost by the population increase greater than such gains (LEE, 1984).

The overcoming of this trap towards progress and creation of wealth for well-being and improvement in living conditions is due to *marginal gain* via endogenous increase in agricultural production technology (Industrial Revolution, for example) motivated by the need generated by population increase (as opposed *to short time gains*). This would be the Ester Boserup's opposition to Malthus proposition, she stated that large population masses resulting from high fertility and migrations are not just burdens, on the contrary, they constitute assets/bonuses to create, exchange and enhance technological means for the advancement of social welfare (LEE, 1984). In West Africa, we have seen interesting dynamics of these exchanges and generation of development projects at the level of the entire sub-region.

In addition, we are facing a continent in vogue in the social field research agendas today and one of its regions (West Africa) have one of the most vibrant dynamics if we look at the scenario of its demographic profile. In 2021, for example, around 70% of West Africa's almost half a billion population (450 million) were between 15-24 years old. This on a continent where 75% of migration is intracontinental. Back onto the West African scenario, the Ivory Coast/Burkina Faso corridor has a flow of 1.5 million migrants per year, Nigeria/Mali is also relevant. So much so that 90% of the 7.5 million migrants in the region are intra-regional (between the countries of the ECOWAS bloc).

Similar to the today's developed countries population economic history, Africa has faced the "Malthusian trap". However, there are also feasibility for endogenous transformation encouraged by technology and innovation generated by the population (births and migrations), making qualitative leaps that enable the workforce resulting from the population boom to contribute to the generation of surpluses, accumulation of wealth and harnessing of the demographic dividend.

Challenges and potentialities for the case of West Africa

In the case of this paper my main focus will be centered on West Africa, where ECOWAS is a regional integration bloc created in 1979 and made up by 15 countries. Its visa–free policy and others economic and sociopolitical integration policies frameworks are one of the most advanced arrangements of its kind in the whole continent of Africa. For the African continent, the annual increase in the urban population rose from 7 million between 1980-84 to 20 million between 2015-19, as shown by Manning data (2022).

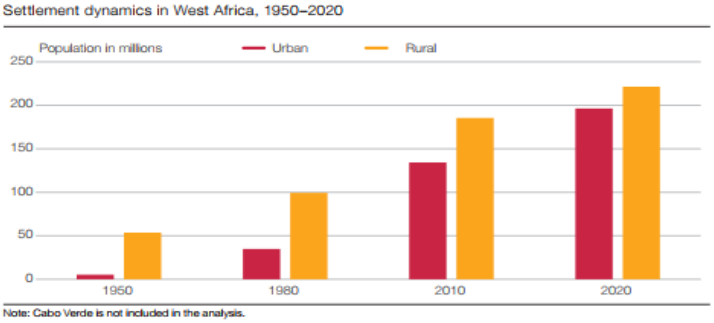
Figure 1: Urban population over time: world and West Africa

TABLE 16.4 World urban population: average annual change by continent, within five-year periods, in millions of persons

	1980–84	*1990–94*	*2000–04*	*2010–14*	*2015–19*
Africa	7	9	11	17	20
Asia	31	36	47	49	49
Europe	4	2	2	2	2
Latin America and the Caribbean	8	8	7	7	7
Northern America	2	3	3	3	3
Oceania	0	0	0	0	0
World total	***52***	***58***	***70***	***78***	***80***

Source: United Nations (2018); Manning (2021b).

Note: For each five-year period, the average annual population change is the mean population for the period multiplied by the average annual population growth rate for the period (Manning 2021b).



Source: Patrick manning, 2022 & OECD/Walther 2021

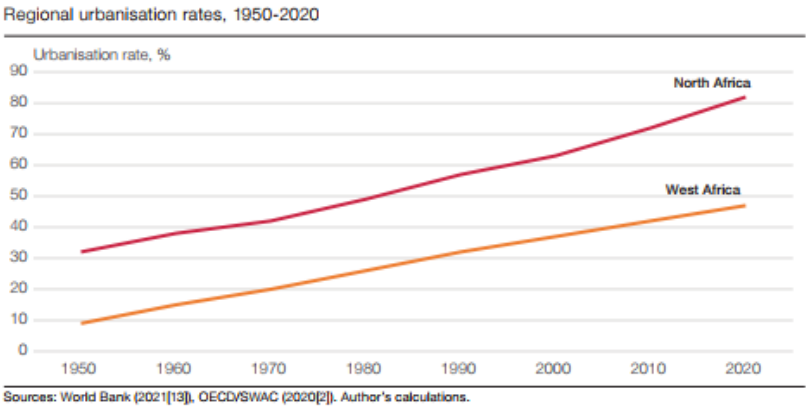
Even so, Sub-Saharan Africa is the least urban region in the world, with only 45% of its population in urban areas, in some cases in this region of the continent the urbanization process seems to have slowed down. According to data from *Statista*, in contrast, the proportion of the urban population in the other regions of the world is as follows: the Americas 82%, Europe 75%, and Asia 51%. If we put it a clearer way: Uruguay, Netherlands and Brazil have respectively 96, 93 and 90% of their population living in urban areas, in Nigeria (an African country with a vibrant urban dynamic), the urban proportion of its population is around 53% only.

Figure 2: population and urbanization rate over time: world, North and West Africa

TABLE 16.3 World urban population in millions, by continent

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Africa	129	200	286	409	588
Asia	717	1,040	1,400	1,877	2,361
Europe	469	505	517	538	557
Latin America and the Caribbean	235	315	397	470	539
Northern America	188	211	247	277	305
Oceania	16	19	21	25	29
World total	***1,754***	***2,290***	***2,868***	***3,595***	***4,379***

Source: United Nations (2018).



Source: Patrick manning, 2022 & OECD/Walther 2021

Also according to *Statista* data, the African continent is also the one with the youngest population in the world. In 2023, about 40% of its population was 15 years old or younger, compared to a global average of 25%. In West Africa, this proportion is around 70% of the population in the 15-24 age group. Although the average age on the continent has increased annually, it remains low, at around 20 years old.

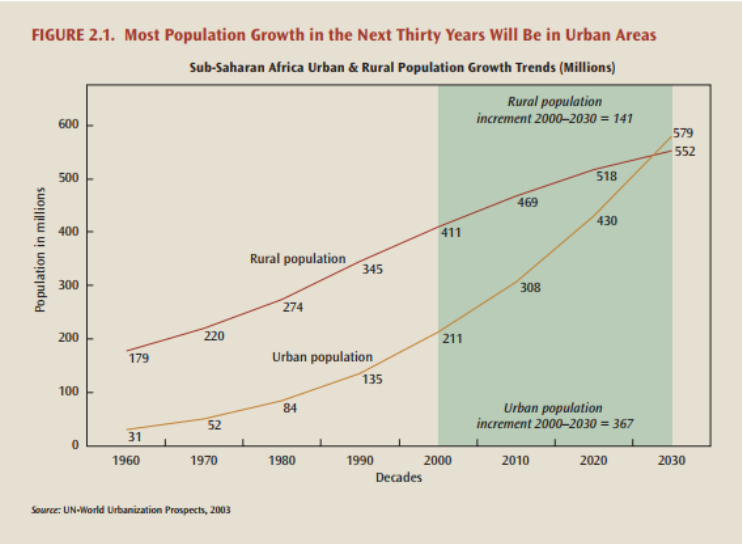
Maintaining the reflection on population interlinked issues: concerning development and human mobility, a key aspect is that the latter has significant consequences on population dynamics and well-being, given that population growth resulting from falls in mortality rates, consistency of fertility and rural-urban migration leads to a new balance in the spatial redistribution of the population. This new urban dynamic affects social and economic aspects, where social networks in urban areas influence the impact and effectiveness of public policies.

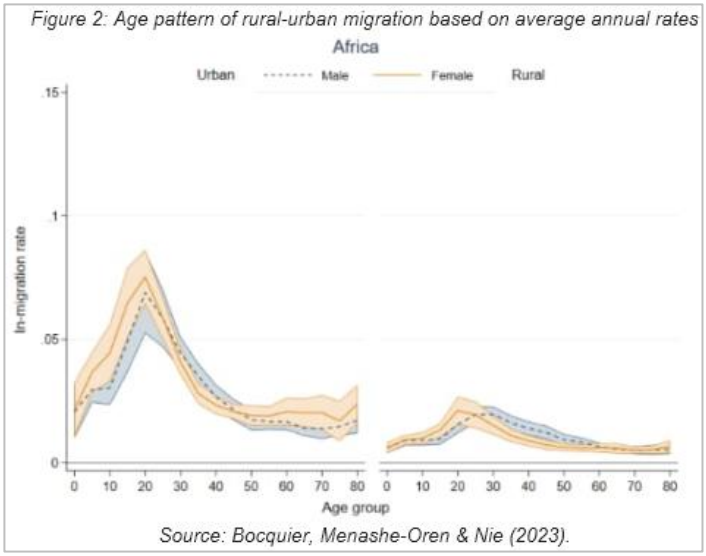
There are many non-negligible challenges and risks associated with the urbanization process that could be better understood through research, deeper investigations and public policy interventions. With regard to the relationship between urbanization, mobility and economic development, we note that in addition to population dynamics, urban expansion encourages the decentralization of political power from large and traditional urban centers to locations that need to take advantage of their productive potential, help with the challenges of globalization of the economies of these countries, all this in the face of challenging population dynamics but at the same time bearers of opportunities with potential transformative, fostering the achievement of the gains of the urban transition that consists of economic growth and poverty reduction in these urban agglomerations. Human mobility plays an important role in this balance.

In fact, this mass population movement reveals challenges in terms of housing, educational infrastructure, health, employment, adoption of technologies and training of professional skills so that these people can access services, infrastructure and economic opportunities to provide qualified contributions to economic growth and wealth generation.

According to data resulting from the OECD study (2022) on urbanization dynamics in Africa and the economic potential of African cities, urban regions in Africa have been responsible for 1/3 of GDP growth, largely due to the acceleration of urbanization, migration movements and regional integration on the continent.

Figure 3: Urban population projection, rate and age pattern of rural-urban migration in Africa





Source: World Bank/Christine Kessides, 2006

As a result, rural areas also benefit from ideational remittances, resources, and economic exchanges with nearby urban centers and/or satellite cities – all of which is enhanced by human mobility. At the transnational level, the economic integration of the continent through the free movement of people and goods is one of the projects that can represent opportunity and greater margin for growth for larger economies, while allowing smaller economies access to larger markets. This integration has in the case of West Africa (ECOWAS regional body) the most successful example of the continent.

Brief final considerations

As we have seen throughout this discussion, the subject concerning the triad population growth and/or human mobility, urbanization and economic development has diversified approaches, actors, disciplines, ideas and projects.

The contribution of rural-urban migration plays a less preponderant role than the fertility generated by the population boom; but we are certain that the increase in the urban population and the progressive expansion of urban areas, as Bocquier, Menashe-Oren and Nie (2023) have shown, are accelerated by migration.

This residual influence of human mobility is not neglectable, since it serves as a regulator of the supply of labor, allocation of demand for employment, and balance in the distribution of qualified people across the different regions and labor markets of African countries. Improving this dynamic is one of the key aspects for the continent to exploit the benefits of urbanization and accumulate the gains from the dividend window provided by the demographic transition process.

In this order of ideas, the drop in mortality combined with the still high fertility is the equation responsible for the young age structure of the African continent today. The population surplus resulting from this process presents challenges in the search for overcoming *short time gains* and the "Malthusian trap", and migrations serve as an escape valve in reducing the pressure of demand for education, employment and well-being.

These processes of human mobility balance the distribution of the population between areas of lower and higher demographic pressure and also expand this population between countries with low and high development level. Thus, providing adequate human capital formation for this population is a key aspect to generate sufficient *marginal gains* capable of resulting in the leverage of the dividend of demographic transition, wealth accumulation and increased opportunities for economic development with social well-being and improvements in living conditions.

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