

# Youth, Employment and Migration: Urban opportunities, with a focus on Africa

Ton Dietz

**Demographically, Africa has become the big exception. On a continental scale, Asia, Oceania and Latin America – like Europe, and North America before it – reached demographic stability between 2000 and 2015. Average fertility rates on these continents plunged from more than five or six children per woman in the 1960s to an average of around two in recent years, and in Europe considerably lower still. Africa as well is experiencing a process of demographic transition, yet there are differences: Africa began at a higher level (more than seven children per woman in the 1960s and 1970s), and the pace of transition is much slower than, for instance, in Asia. Currently the fertility rates for Africa as a whole are still beyond four children per woman, and UN demographers expect that Africa will not reach demographic stability until around 2100.**

On a world scale the consequences seem obvious: Africa's demographic weight will increase markedly (to 40 per cent of the world population in 2100), as its population will have grown from the current 1.3 billion people to approximately four billion in 2100. The African population is and will remain very young. Median age will be around 20 for many years to come, and there will be a gradual shift from a demographic pyramid (with a wide base) to a population composition in which the 15-35 cohort will dominate, although this will probably not occur until close to 2050. Within Africa, of course, huge differences are present: South Africa, North Africa, and recently even Kenya have reached demographic stability or are rapidly moving in that direction, while the highest fertility levels can be found in a belt from Mali via Niger and Northern Nigeria to Central Africa to Ethiopia. There is a strong correlation between high fertility rates and low education participation for women, and between generally low urbanisation rates and high fertility rates.

Since about 2000, Africa has experienced three major additional “revolutions” (like those in many other parts of the world): relatively high economic growth (in some years the economic growth figures for Africa as a whole have even been higher than those for Asia as a whole), relatively large increases in participation in education and in the effectiveness of health care (partly triggered by the Millennium Development Goals and, currently, the Sustainable Development Goals), and rapid increases in the use of mobile phones as well as internet access and use. As a result, young people's aspirations have grown, and many African rural youngsters have attended urban education facilities (nearby and further away) and are trying to get jobs in the rapidly expanding cities. Urban expansion (in absolute and relative terms; soon Africa will have more urban than rural people) has already been impressive. In 1960 Africa had an urbanisation rate of 20 per cent, with 65 million people in urban agglomerations. Currently the urbanisation rate is between 40 and 45 per cent, with around 500 million urbanites, and is expected to exceed 1.2 billion by 2050. Urban people need food, shelter, water, energy, clothing and many other things. It is already clear that urban hinterlands are being revolutionised to turn from basically self-supporting agricultural economies, with enclaves of mining and agriculture for export to the world market (and with a recent shift from Europe and North America to Asia), to commercial producers of a host of goods and services for the urban population. Although rural supply to urban demand is mainly an intra-national affair, increasingly urban hinterlands also expand to neighbouring countries; in some regions, urban built-up areas become part of megacities, sometimes across borders. Kinshasa-Brazzaville currently has more than 13 million inhabitants. Lagos, already at more than 20 million, is becoming part of a huge African Atlantic city belt from Abidjan to Lagos in which there will probably be more than 150 million people in 2050.

African youngsters are on the move. Growing aspirations paired with growing capabilities (individually and as a result of family investments) lead to growing migration: from rural areas to small and intermediate cities, and to megacities. Young people also move within cities, trying to escape from the most risky environments and moving to more well-to-do (and better protected) environments. With increasing wealth, as recent data about international migration shows,



*The CityVeg project supported direct selling by young farmers in Accra. Photo by IWMI*

the percentage of Africans going abroad is increasing as well: half of the travel is to neighbouring countries and the other half to destinations further away. Within Africa this leads, for instance, to migration to South Africa. As well, intercontinental migration has recently increased, with Europe still dominating but Asia growing in importance. Currently, intercontinental migration from Africa as a whole is in the range of one per cent of its population. With increasing wealth this could grow to what can be seen as the world average for intercontinental migration: between two and three per cent. In absolute numbers this is a change from the 12 million Africans currently elsewhere to more than 50 million in 2050. In relative terms, however, the intra-African migration of Africa's youth is and will remain much more significant.

Although youth migration in its various forms poses many challenges, it proves to have many advantages as well. Migrants invest in their new environments, and bring with them lots of new ideas. We are seeing hybridisation of lifestyles, consumption patterns, and production and service initiatives everywhere. Migrants also influence their areas of rural or urban origin, and invest in opportunities they see in these "home areas", in agriculture and in the service or other industries of the small urban centres near their former rural homes. For many, urban and periurban agriculture is worth trying, in these home regions as well as in their new urban environments. This form of agriculture can be for home consumption within families but also in the form of more commercial ventures, particularly for relatively high-value products like chicken, eggs, milk, meat and many types of vegetables and fruits. Some of these products also feed an agro-industrial sector, and an agro-service industry, and

offer opportunities for youth and adult entrepreneurs and workers. The supermarkets, fast-food restaurants and bars-with-food increasing in number in African cities provide ample opportunities for additional employment and business ventures, frequently for workers and entrepreneurs who are women. The downsides are visible as well, though: in many cities obesity is rapidly becoming a more serious health problem than hunger. And even with very sharp increases in urban-demand related employment creation for Africa's youth, the numbers of employment seekers (and their aspirations for a better life) are rising so rapidly that local employment creation will never be enough. This will continually lead to aspirations among Africa's youth to try their luck elsewhere, even if many lack the financial and social means to do so effectively. Add to this the likely direct and indirect effects of climate change....



Ton Dietz  
African Studies Centre Leiden  
[a.j.dietz@asc.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:a.j.dietz@asc.leidenuniv.nl)

#### Documentation for further reading

[Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century](#)

[Africa population dynamics](#)

[Africa: international migration, emigration 2015](#)

[Africa's international trade 2001-2016: boom and bust](#)

[Agricultural consumption and production, 1961-2009](#)