

THE DEMOGRAPHIC DETERMINANTS OF AFRICA'S CHANGING GLOBAL POSITION

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Abstract: Demographic growth has in recent years been one of the determining characteristics of African development, and if projections are correct, the continent is set to become a population superpower. Its proportion of the world population, especially relative to the “old continent”, is increasing in a historically unprecedented manner, and its inhabitants are younger than ever. Although it is still difficult to assess whether this trend should be regarded as an opportunity or as a potential risk factor, it is already possible to discern the first definitive signs of how this evolving new distribution of demographic power is shifting Africa's geopolitical and economic position in today's polycentric world.

Key words: demographic change; Sub-Saharan Africa; polycentric world; demographic dividend; Africa–EU Partnership

Introduction

In September 2015, the member states of the United Nations (UN) adopted a global development agenda for the upcoming 15 years consisting of 17 ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN Secretary-General applauded the decision on the “universal, transformative, and integrated agenda” that foreshadowed a “historic turning point for our world” (United Nations, 2015).

In comparison with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which set the tone for debates and actions in international development at the beginning of the 21st century, the new 2030 Agenda introduces a more universalist perspective centred around the ideal of sustainability. Developed states were expected to transfer resources and know-how to developing countries. The goals themselves focused on the difficulties associated with underdevelopment and formed part of the development paradigm “based on ideas of benevolent charity, humanitarian cosmopolitanism, and/or historical injustice” (Langford, 2016, p. 172).

This approach is still present in the 2030 Agenda to a certain degree. However, many SDGs are now relevant regardless of a country's level of development and cover the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (Langford, 2016). The real paradigm shift lies in the realisation that developed states have development

challenges too, especially if long-term sustainability is seen as the most important determinant of development. In this new agenda, irresponsible production and excessive consumption as well as unbalanced global structures of power and financing are elevated to the status of poverty and hunger, making the SDGs the potential precursor to institutional cosmopolitanism. The root causes of global sustainability challenges are identified as existing in global structures, prompting calls for measures aimed at finding a new balance. In comparison with the Millennium Declaration, adopted in September 2000, the 2030 Agenda also refocuses attention away from foreign assistance and onto domestic development. The effectiveness of international aid in lifting countries out of poverty has often been questioned, especially when the value of foreign assistance is weighted against the potential of internal resources to address inequalities and promote sustainable development (Langford, 2016). The paradigm shift reflected in these two global development agendas is indicative of the changing global position of Africa, a continent where most of the least developed countries are to be found. African countries' domestic political, economic and social tendencies and developments have become issues of global significance.

This paper will concentrate on a specific trend with serious global implications, namely Africa's rapidly growing population and dramatically increasing proportion of the world's populace. I will argue that these trends have the potential to transform Africa's geopolitical and economic position in today's polycentric world, despite the relative lack of attention devoted to them on global fora and in the specialist literature. The first part of the article comprises a historical overview of African demographics, and population forecasts. In the second part, the economic, social and environmental implications of demographic change are discussed. Finally, Africa's changing geopolitical position is scrutinised through a look at how Africa–EU relations have evolved.

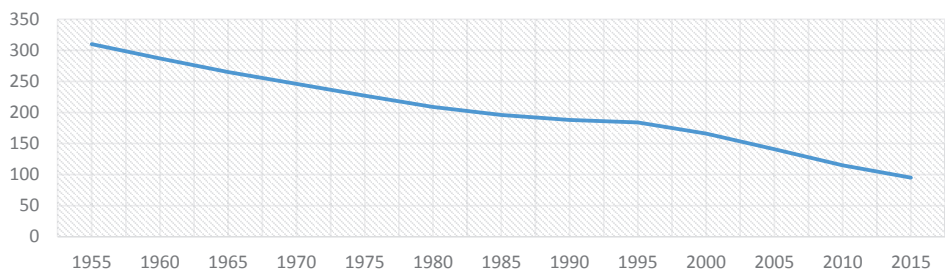
Africa's population from a historical perspective

For centuries the population of Africa had been characterised by low population density. Around the year 1500, it had on average 2 inhabitants per square kilometre, which increased to only about 4 inhabitants per square kilometre by year 1900. The 1920s saw the beginnings of the basis of future population growth, with measures being taken to fight endemic diseases on the continent (Jacquemot, 2013). By the 1950s, increased healthcare provision was accompanied by a rise in female education, the single most important factor in the decline of child mortality in Africa (Parker & Reid, 2013).

The available UN Population Division data show a constant decline in under-five mortality rates from the 1950s. The decline appears to have slowed down temporarily in the 1980s and 1990s, which may be attributed to cuts in public spending on healthcare and education as a result of structural adjustment, especially in the 1980s (Davis, 2017), as well as to a surge in HIV infections in the 1990s affecting life expectancy and mortality rates, including under-five mortality. This latter began to drop at the end of the 1990s (graph no. 1).

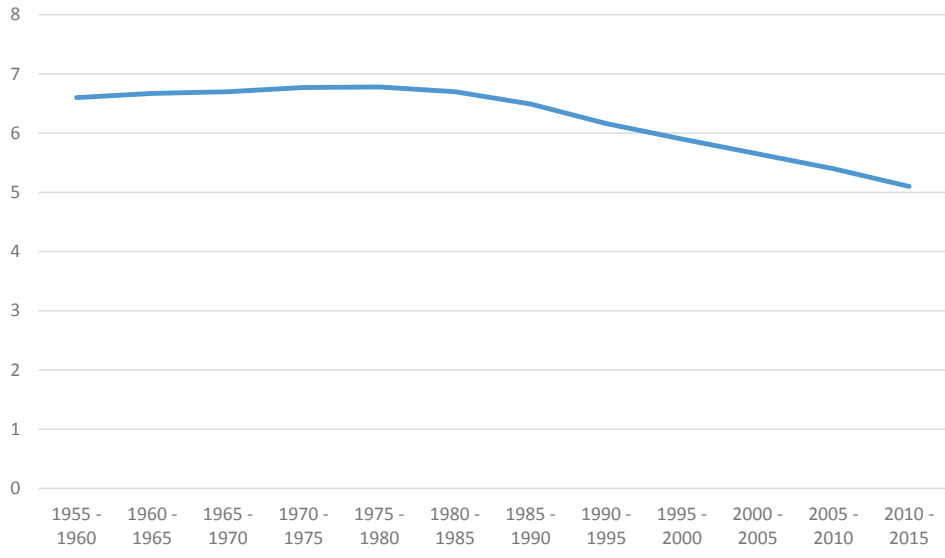
In the same time period, fertility rates initially began slightly increasing, owing to the improving health of the population. Fertility rates peaked around 1970, remaining stable for roughly a decade, before gradually dropping from the 1980s onwards (graph no. 2).

Graph no. 1. Under-five mortality rate in Sub-Saharan Africa (deaths under age five per 1,000 live births)



Source: United Nations, 2017.

Graph no. 2. Total fertility rate in Sub-Saharan Africa (children per woman)



Source: United Nations, 2017.

The decrease in fertility has, however, been slower than expected. This is well documented in the corrections of fertility estimates in respective editions of the UN World Population Prospects. The 2000 revision put the medium projection of the fertility rate in Africa in 2045– 2050 at 2.39 children per woman (United Nations, 2000). However, in the 2017 revision it was 3.09 (United Nations, 2017). By contrast, the 2017 revision projected that fertility rates in all the other world regions would drop faster than the 2000 revision had.

The synergy between improving healthcare provision and expanding female education caused mortality rates to drop, while fertility rates first stagnated and then gradually started to drop with a considerable time lag. This led demographic growth on the continent to follow an exponential trajectory. This phenomenon can be best explained by the theory of the demographic transition, in which a high birth/high death demographic equilibrium becomes a low birth/low death equilibrium with a high birth/low death transitional phase. In the first phase of the demographic transition, mortality rates drop sharply, while fertility rates remain stable, creating exceptionally large cohorts which drive population growth in subsequent decades. In the second phase, fertility rates start to drop with a time lag.

Africa was the last continent to enter this transition (Green, 2010). Most developed countries have already completed their demographic transition, and most of Latin America and East Asia are in the advanced stages in which fertility rates have already dropped sharply. Africa's demographic transition is only starting to enter its second phase. While a small number of African countries are far ahead in the transition, with fertility rates that are close to or below replacement levels (United Nations, 2017),¹ many others have experienced significant delays in the transition in the past 10 years. Some countries are still showing very little movement in natural transition and are stuck at very high fertility rates (Canning, Raja, & Yazbeck, 2015). The most notable examples are Niger, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mali, where a very high average fertility of over 5.9 children per woman is still prevalent (United Nations, 2017).²

African population outlook

As a result of its ongoing and rather protracted demographic transition, the African continent has seen considerable recent population growth and is expected to add in excess of another 3 billion people to the world population by 2100, when its demographic transition is expected to be complete. For comparison, Africa had 1.05 billion inhabitants in 2010 and the UN Population Division estimates its population will reach 2.5 billion in 2050, a figure that is further projected to increase to 4.5 billion by the end of the 21st century (United Nations, 2017). The continent's population could thus quadruple in the 90 years from 2010 and 2100. It is important to note that these projections are significantly higher than those from the beginning of the decade (United Nations, 2010)³, mainly due to fertility rates dropping more slowly than expected.

In the global perspective, what is even more significant than the very high pace of change and growth rate of the African population, is the dramatically changing relative position of the continent globally, in terms of its demography. Historically, Africa was

¹ Replacement level fertility is the fertility rate at which the population size is maintained over the long term. It is normally around 2.1 children per woman but can vary depending on mortality rates (esp. under-five mortality rates). The only Sub-Saharan African country with total fertility below replacement level in 2010–2015 was Mauritius.

² The highest total fertility rates in Sub-Saharan Africa are, in decreasing order: Niger – 7.15, Somalia – 6.12, Democratic Republic of the Congo – 5.96, Mali – 5.92.

³ In 2010, the UN Population Division's medium projection for the African population in 2100 was 3.6 billion people—almost 1 billion fewer than the most recent estimate from 2017.

scarcely populated and throughout the last millennium accounted for around 10 per cent of the world population (McEvedy & Jones, 1978). According to projections, this could change dramatically in the coming decades. Africa is expected to account for roughly 60 per cent of all the anticipated world population growth by 2050, with an additional 1.3 billion people out of 2.2 billion. Beyond 2050, the continent is projected to be the only world region continuing to grow in population terms (United Nations, 2017). It is important to note, that the population of Africa will continue to increase in the coming decades even if fertility rates were to fall immediately from the current rate of 4.43 to replacement level. This is due to Africa's age structure, which is exceptionally youthful. As these large cohorts of children and youths will be reaching adulthood in the coming decades, their childbearing will further increase the size of the African population, even if they have on average much lower fertility rates than their parents' generation. Africa's proportion of the global population could therefore, based on medium projections, rise from around 9 per cent in 1950 to 40 per cent in 2100 (United Nations, 2017). If we take into consideration that Africa's relative share of the world population has been largely constant over the last millennium at least, it seems almost inevitable that this shift will have considerable and wide-ranging geopolitical, economic, social, and environmental consequences.

Demographic change: Opportunity or threat

While the changes described above will undoubtedly have major implications for Africa's future development, there is little agreement on whether it should be regarded as an opportunity or as a threat, and what the global implications of it will be.

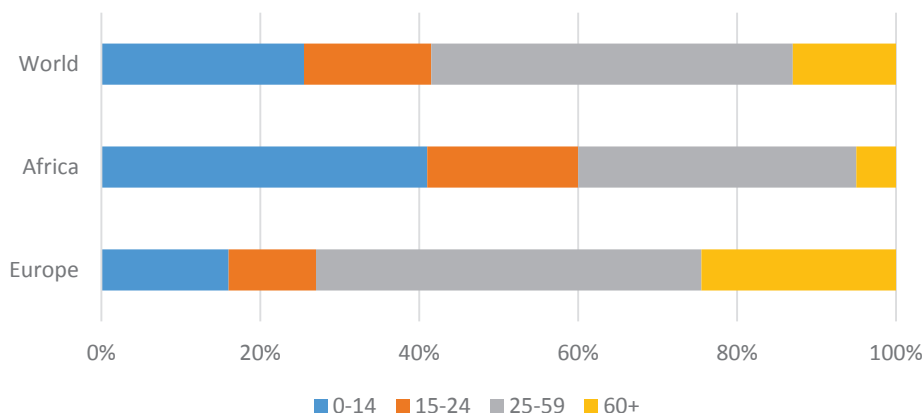
One of the most widely discussed phenomena in this context is Africa's young age structure, a result of the ongoing demographic transition. The demographic dividend theory and the theory of youth bulges show two very different potential trajectories of African development, as a consequence of this youthful age structure.

On the more optimistic side, similarly to the so-called "Asian Tigers", African states and the world could benefit hugely from the continent's ability to reap its demographic dividend. The demographic dividend is a phenomenon which occurs in the second phase of the demographic transition, namely when declines in child mortality are followed by declines in fertility, resulting in a low dependency ratio. It is a period of roughly a few decades, during which the working-age population has to support relatively fewer dependents (children or elderly people), potentially leading to economic growth.

While fertility rates have been steadily decreasing in virtually all Sub-Saharan African⁴ countries since the 1990s, in many countries, fertility rates and young-age dependency ratios are still too high for a demographic dividend to occur. At the continent level, children under age 15 made up 41 per cent of the population in 2017, while youth aged between 15 and 24 accounted for 19 per cent (graph no. 3). If fertility rates continue to drop more rapidly, the continent could have an age structure that would enable a demographic dividend.

⁴ North African countries reached fertility rates close to replacement level at the beginning of the 21st century. As a result, their fertility rates are stable rather than decreasing.

Graph no. 3. Percentage of population in broad age groups in 2017



Source: United Nations, 2017.

The benefits of a demographic dividend can, however, be reaped only when a number of other conditions apply as well. Strong demand for labour is crucial, as large youth cohorts need to be able to find productive employment, rather than remain unemployed or find themselves forced into low-productivity work. Moreover, the economic environment needs to be conducive, and there need to be considerable investments in health and education which increase productivity.

In Africa, harnessing the demographic dividend presents substantive challenges. First of all, the continent's demographic transition seems to be very protracted. Secondly, in most countries there is insufficient labour demand, and an inability to employ the working-age population productively. Finally, as population growth is concentrated in the poorest and least developed countries, many of which are expected to at least triple in size between 2017 and 2100, prospects for improving education and health systems may be limited (United Nations, 2017).

While the demographic dividend theory seems promising under certain conditions, suggesting that populous youth cohorts will be able to reap economic and social benefits, the continuing high fertility and high dependency rates significantly increase the risk of conflict erupting, rather than economic benefits being generated. An unfavourable economic climate with low growth or even decline, and high unemployment at a time when large youth cohorts are entering the labour market, would further strengthen this tendency (Urdal, 2006).

The opportunity for this is found in the abundant supply of young men who can actively participate in conflicts and join rebellions at a low opportunity cost. Recruitment thus becomes less costly and the risk of armed conflict increases (Green, 2010). In other words, young rebel recruits may see the potential gains of joining as being much higher than the possible costs, and thus will favour joining the conflict over alternative ways of earning a living (Collier, 2000).

The motives driving youths towards violence usually appear in contexts of relative deprivation and can take two main forms: economic, such as poverty, inequality, or economic decline; or political, for instance a lack of representation of various subgroups in society, or the absence of a democratic system (Gurr, 1970). Large youth cohorts often face challenges stemming from economic and political realities, such as high unemployment, meagre income prospects, institutional obstacles, cronyism, or crowding in urban centres. In turn, frustration, especially among educated youths, as well as despair, originating from such conditions, boosts the chances of violence erupting (Azeng & Yogo, 2013). The existence of serious grievances is not enough on its own for collective violent action to erupt, however—the motive always needs to be supported by opportunity (Urdal, 2006).

From an economic perspective, Africa's growing population potentially offers significant economic opportunities. Overall private consumption is projected to reach EUR 2 trillion annually in 2025, and companies in Africa are expected to provide an even larger market, with spending levels projected to reach EUR 3.3 trillion annually by 2025 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). While the economic trends in Africa are encouraging, economic growth tends to be fragile and not sufficiently inclusive or sustainable to offer better prospects for the majority of inhabitants, including youths. Overall economic growth need not translate into improvements in the economic and social conditions of a large section of the population. Inequality in Africa is rampant, and it is the poor who tend to have the highest fertility rates, with an increasing number of people caught in poverty often competing for the same limited resources (Davis, 2017).

Another major economic issue that may diminish Africa's prospects for rapid development is the crucial need to generate millions of new productive jobs. According to projections, Sub-Saharan Africa needs to create 18 million new jobs yearly up to 2035 to accommodate new labour market entrants, compared to the current figure of 3 million formal jobs. The inadequate employment provided by the formal sector and the lack of social protection systems pressures most young people into relying on the informal economy as a means of survival (Hughes, 2017). The situation is expected to be even grimmer in Africa's rapidly growing cities, where informal employment will somehow have to absorb 90 per cent of urban Africa's new workers over the next decade (Davis, 2017).

At the same time, competition is increasing even within the informal sector, as self-help and solidarity networks seem to be weakening or dissolving. Those in the labour force need to be ever more flexible, and accept the absence of enforced labour rights. Labour force entrants also have to face a system of bribes, tribal loyalties and ethnic exclusion, in which obtaining labour opportunities usually requires patronage or membership of a closed network. As a consequence, the prevalence of unprotected informal-sector employment under the conditions of an infinite labour supply can exacerbate ethnoreligious or racial tension or even violence (Davis, 2017).

Rapid population growth will undoubtedly lead to increasing demand for resources in terms of food, water, or energy. Many of these resources are, however, becoming scarcer by the day, due to climate change and environmental depletion. While part of the solution to Africa's growing resource and energy needs could lie in technological innovations and coping mechanisms, the question is how African countries, some of which are among the least developed on earth, can adopt such radically new and advanced technologies. One

possible answer is offered by the concept of leapfrogging, which in development theory refers to an accelerated pace of development over developed states that enables the country to skip inferior technologies and industries, and move instead to ones that are more efficient, less costly, or less polluting. In this sense, Africa's underdevelopment and lack of existing 20th century infrastructure can actually be turned into an opportunity, or even advantage. One of the most obvious example of "leapfrog technologies" in Africa is the mobile phone. Most African countries skipped the fixed-line 20th century technology and moved straight to the 21st century mobile technology (The limits of leapfrogging, 2008). Kenya, in particular, has carried this development even further, having one of the most advanced mobile payment systems in the world, which encourages local trade and home-based economic growth. When embraced by an educated labour force and youth, new technologies enabling more efficient and less environmentally harmful ways of producing goods could provide the solutions to Africa's booming resource and energy needs, and its already grave ecological and food security issues. It is clear that existing methods will not be able to serve the needs of Africa's growing population.

Finally, apart from conflict, the economy, and the environment, migration trends are also influenced by demographic dynamics. Amid rapid demographic growth, migration in Africa has been steadily increasing over the past 20 years. While the migration rate (migration to total population) has remained stable at about 2 per cent, the region doubled its population between 1990 and 2013. The number of migrants reached 20 million in 2013 and is likely to rise in the coming decades given the demographic boom in the working-age population, from where the majority of migrants tend to come from (Gonzalez-Garcia, Hitaj, Mlachila, Viseth, & Yenice, 2016). While the total population of Sub-Saharan Africa is projected to increase from about 1 billion in 2017 to 2.2 billion in 2050, the working-age population is set to grow even more rapidly, from 550 million in 2017 to 1.3 billion in 2050 (United Nations, 2017).

At the beginning of the 1990s, intraregional migration in Sub-Saharan Africa represented 75 per cent of total migration. Over the last 15 years, however, migration outside the region has accelerated, especially to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and by 2013 represented as much as one third of all migrants (Gonzalez-Garcia, Hitaj, Mlachila, Viseth, & Yenice, 2016). The key drivers of this trend are the large and persistent economic and demographic asymmetries between the global south and north. The above described developments have caused migration to become a pivotal area of Africa–EU cooperation, potentially altering their relationship and relative position, as demonstrated below.

Changing global position

The African continent's relative share of the world population is set to grow explosively in the 21st century. While it is still uncertain what the exact implications of this shift will be for Africa's relative share of global influence and significance, its global position has already started to change profoundly, most visibly vis-à-vis Europe. In order to demonstrate this changing relationship, a closer look at the evolution of Africa–EU relations since the end of the Cold War is necessary.

In the post-colonial period, the relationship between Africa and Europe was characterised by the underlying global dynamics and the political context of the two continents. In the second half of the 20th century the Yaoundé Conventions and Lomé Conventions were the main legal framework of cooperation between Europe and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP), focused on trade and aid (Europe Africa Policy Research Network, 2010).

After the end of the Cold War, Africa's geostrategic importance faltered, since it was no longer an arena of intense competition and rivalry in a bipolar world. In this context, the ACP countries' importance to the EU diminished slightly, and the EU turned towards development issues which were closer to its borders, namely in Central and Eastern Europe.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, there has been a resurgence in Africa's geostrategic importance, partly due to security matters, which have become fundamental issues of international security, but also due to economic reasons, as Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, increased its importance as oil supplier, due to instability in the Middle East. Moreover, the MDGs refocused attention on the world's developing and least developed countries, many of which can be found in Africa. Last but not least, with the adoption of its Constitutive Act in 2000, the African Union (AU) has undergone a paradigm shift relative to its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity. This has allowed the AU to become a relevant partner for the EU in discussions of security and development issues. This shift occurred owing to considerable restraint in applying the principle of non-intervention and respect for sovereignty, which gave the AU wide-ranging authority to intervene in African conflicts (Europe Africa Policy Research Network, 2010).

During the second Africa–EU Summit in 2007, referred to as the Summit of Equals, the Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES) was adopted, with the aim of building “a new strategic political partnership for the future, overcoming the traditional donor–recipient relationship and building on common values” (Lisbon Declaration – EU Africa Summit, 2007). The strategy aspired to go beyond development and expand Africa–EU cooperation into new areas of common interest and concern, such as governance and human rights, trade and regional integration, energy, climate change, migration, mobility and employment, and science (The Partnership and Joint Africa–EU Strategy, n.d.). It regarded Africa strategically, as one continent, and supported continental integration within the AU. At the same time, it tried to ensure the effective participation of civil society and the private sector in shaping the Africa–EU partnership.

In its initial years, the implementation of the commitments laid down in the JAES was rather weak, as both sides of the partnership had very different priorities. The African side emphasised mainly economic and trade issues, including external debt, while the European side preferred to focus on peace and security issues. This latter preference is also reflected in the fact that one of the earliest and key instruments supporting the Africa–EU partnership is the African Peace Facility, providing funding for peace and security initiatives, including capacity building and peace support operations, and the development of an early response mechanism (European Commission, 2017a).

Despite obstacles, the need for a mind-set and paradigm shift in Africa–EU relations has become more and more pronounced in recent years, particularly taking into account considerable changes in both continents in terms of economic, social, and demographic

dynamics. Since the 2015 migration crisis, Africa has taken centre-stage on the European agenda, as a source as well as transit area for migration to Europe. As a consequence, the Africa–EU partnership has received the high-level political buy-in it had lacked for decades and arguably for the first time in years. Tackling the economic, social, environmental, and demographic challenges of Africa has come to be seen as a genuine concern and priority for both sides. EU security interests have never before been so intertwined with Africa.

Since 2015, the Africa–EU partnership has seen a boost in following up on and implementing commitments, as well as in funding. At an initial stage, the EU Trust Fund for Africa was established in 2015, reacting directly to the ongoing unprecedented levels of irregular migration to Europe. Its aim is to foster stability in some of the most fragile African countries and to address the root causes of destabilisation, displacement, and irregular migration by promoting equal economic opportunities, security, and development (European Commission, 2018a).

In recent years, a major shift from aid to investment has been noticeable as well. In August 2015 the Africa Investment Facility was created, with the aim of leveraging supplementary development resources and increasing the impact of EU aid. The facility combines EU grants with other resources, such as loans from Development Finance Institutions (European Commission, 2018b). In 2016 an ambitious External Investment Plan was proposed by the EU, with the objective of boosting investments in fragile countries by leveraging private sector investments (European Commission, 2017b). The plan is targeted at fragile countries, which receive only 6 per cent of global foreign direct investment, while most of that limited financing goes to resource-rich fragile countries. It is envisioned that investments supported by the plan will support inclusive and sustainable growth with a particular focus on job creation, and contribute to addressing the root causes of migration.

The most recent 2017 Joint Communication of the European Commission on the Africa–EU Partnership clearly reconfirms Africa’s importance in the internal and external dimensions of Europe’s security and prosperity. It promotes more effective cooperation on common interests based on frequent political interaction, and stronger engagement with local authorities, private sector and civil society. Based on the AU’s reform Agenda 2063, as well as on the EU’s external policy framework, the Joint Communication sets the focus of the Africa–EU Partnership on building more resilient states and societies, and on creating more and better jobs, especially for youths. Within the first strain, the cooperation will be aimed at preventing conflicts, strengthening governance and managing migration. The second strain of activities will focus on boosting sustainable investment and advancing knowledge and skills (European Commission, 2017c).

As demonstrated, ever since 2015, migration and security have come to strongly dominate Africa–EU debates and agendas, allowing less attention to be paid to wider development goals. On the African side, this perceived over-concentration on migration-related issues and on countries that are a source of migration or serve as transit hubs has caused major concern. At the fifth AU–EU summit, which took place in Abidjan in November 2017, both parties made efforts to look at a wider set of concerns and challenges, even though migration was still singled out as one of the key issues of common concern. Common priorities for the Africa–EU Partnership were defined in four strategic areas: economic opportunities for youth, peace and security, mobility and migration, and

cooperation on governance. The main thematic focus of the summit was on investing in youth, especially given that around 60 per cent of the African population is under the age of 25 (European Council, 2017).

The above overview demonstrates that, despite being latent, demographic dynamics, such as the age structure and its effect on the economy, security, or migration trends, substantially influence the setting of the common agenda, and arguably are among the key drivers behind the changing geopolitical position of Sub-Saharan Africa. These relationships are certainly not linear, and more research is needed on Africa's relations vis-à-vis other major regions apart from Europe. The example of the evolving Africa–EU partnership and its major points of common interest can, however, be seen as a potential precursor of Africa's changing position in a polycentric world, exemplified also by the paradigm shift between the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals.

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