



Making the Dividend Count: Bridging Research and Africa's Policy Processes

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Africa has a large youthful population. In 2015, 19 percent of the world's 1.2 billion youth aged 15-24 years lived in Africa.¹ By 2030, Africa's youth population of 226 million is projected to grow by 42 percent,² which could turn the continent into an economic growth powerhouse by 2030.³ However, Africa can achieve this status only by enacting evidence-informed policies and investments that address the challenges facing its large youthful population. Although a demographic dividend can significantly boost development, the failure of African governments to provide youth with access to quality education and productive employment, risks wasting valuable human capital while also jeopardizing peace. Instead of becoming productive citizens youth could remain unemployed, raising their vulnerability to recruitment by rebel or terrorist groups thus raising prospects for increased insecurity on the continent. Policymakers can minimize these risks by prioritizing the use of research to formulate policies that address the challenges facing youth across various sectors. Harnessing the demographic dividend is not just critical to ensuring that African countries achieve their socioeconomic development aspirations, but also to achieving and sustaining peace on the continent.

The demographic dividend is the accelerated economic growth resulting from improved reproductive health, a rapid decline in fertility, and the subsequent shift in population age structure. With fewer births each year, the

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working-age population (15-64 years) grows larger relative to the young, dependent population. With more people in the labor force and fewer children to support, countries have a window of opportunity for economic growth if they make the right social and economic investments in health, education, and governance.⁴ However, if countries do not prioritize these investments at the right time, their countries may miss the opportunity. It is therefore critical for researchers and other experts to communicate demographic dividend research to African leaders and policymakers.

Some African countries have started to move toward realizing the demographic dividend and, although the countries are at different stages of the demographic transition, many policymakers understand its potential. Since 2013, when the Sixth Joint African Union Commission (AUC) and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) Conference recognized the importance of the demographic dividend,⁵ policymakers and experts have signed a series of declarations reiterating their determination to accelerate and utilize it: the *Addis Ababa Declaration on Population and Development in Africa Beyond 2014*,⁶ the African Union (AU) *Common African Position (CAP) on the Post 2015 Development Agenda*; and the *Africa Agenda 2063—The Africa We Want*.⁷ At the 2017 AU Summit, African leaders again committed their governments to investing in Africa's large youthful population.⁸

Despite this high-level expression of commitment, policymakers still need to do more to integrate demographic dividend research into their country's policymaking processes. Drawing on the experiences of expert engagements with policymakers in Uganda, Malawi, and Kenya this paper outlines how experts have effectively communicated demographic dividend research to government officials, who in turn, incorporated these results into policies. While these interactions are still a work in progress, they provide lessons on how experts can more effectively communicate research with policymakers.

Case Studies of Effective Communication of Demographic Dividend Research: Uganda, Malawi, and Kenya

Science communication is a participatory two-way process of engagement and information exchange undertaken to build the public's understanding of research with the goal of benefiting a society socially, politically, culturally, or intellectually.⁹ Science communication with policymakers should emphasize open dialogue as opposed to a top-down, often one-way approach of information transmission.¹⁰

Science communication has played a significant role in untangling the complexities of demographic dividend research. In Uganda, Malawi, and Kenya policymakers have been able to establish medium and long-term development plans, and formulate policies that address challenges affecting their populations in order to better position their countries to take advantage of the demographic dividend. Successful communication of this research to policymakers can be attributed to three main factors: the proper framing of messages, strategic timing, and strong relationships.

Framing

The framing of research in the African context requires being attuned to current policy and political priorities, cultural awareness and having respect for religious views. The manner in which research is framed influences whether policymakers will care enough to act or will refrain from action in order to avoid conflict or because the issue does not matter to them.

A good example of positive framing comes from Uganda. In 2014, experts shared research with President Yoweri Museveni, outlining the country's prospects for harnessing the demographic dividend. They argued

that if the government failed to take urgent action to reduce Uganda's high population growth rate through investments in family planning, hence reducing the child-dependency burden, the country would not achieve its long-term development plan, *Vision 2040*. This framing encouraged a mindset shift: President Museveni, a long-term proponent of population growth, declared that Uganda needed to change its trajectory since "...a large population that is full of peasants who cannot read, feed themselves, [and] who are not healthy is of no use."¹¹

Experts have since worked with the Uganda National Population Commission and the National Planning Authority to develop a roadmap that identifies priority investment areas and actions to harness the demographic dividend and accelerate the achievement of Uganda's *Vision 2040*. So far, the country has launched the *Family Planning Implementation Plan 2015-2020*, whose implementation will reduce the high, unmet need for family planning.¹²

However, the same framing may not work in different contexts. In Cameroon, expert advice on the need to reduce fertility has received pushback due to religious and cultural sensitivities. In many African societies, communities place a high value on having many children. Family planning is further complicated by the view of some religions that the use of modern contraceptives interferes with the sanctity of life. As a result, the demographic dividend agenda has been viewed as a "Trojan horse,"—a Western development model whose real agenda is to sell family planning and attack African values.

To navigate contexts like Cameroon's, experts need to rethink how they frame and discuss contentious issues such as family planning. One solution is to use alternative terminology such as "birth-spacing," in place of family planning. Alignment with local and regional bodies that have a good grasp of the local context is also key. For instance, some experts working in West Africa have collaborated with the Ouagadougou Partnership to engage in family planning advocacy targeted at policymakers. These strategic partnerships may include community ambassadors, such as religious and cultural leaders, who understand the local context and can therefore break barriers on sensitive issues.¹³ However, experts must ensure that these ambassadors understand the demographic dividend to avoid misinformation. This approach is especially critical in countries where policymakers argue that reducing fertility is not necessary for a demographic transition to take place. Effective framing on reducing fertility can convince policymakers that it is the quality, not the size of the population that matters, and a quality population can drive economic growth. Framing can also emphasize the cost of inaction—without both rapid fertility and mortality decline, there will be no youth bulge and therefore no dividends.

Timing

Policymakers have many competing priorities. Therefore, experts must get research to policymakers at the most opportune time. Malawi, one of Africa's poorest countries, has struggled with high population growth. Yet, it offers a promising example of how good timing can push the demographic dividend topic to the top of the policymaking agenda.

In 2015, President Peter Mutharika was appointed as the United Nations Champion for Youth and Demographic Dividend at the same time that researchers were conducting a study to identify how Malawi could harness the demographic dividend. He invited experts to brief him on the demographic dividend so he could take the lead in driving Malawi toward achieving its long-term development aspirations and inform his work as UN ambassador. To this end, he championed the demographic dividend paradigm among fellow African heads of state and government and, under his leadership, African leaders adopted "Harnessing the Demographic Dividend Through Investments in Youth" as the AU theme for 2017.

In addition to engaging the president, experts have continually worked with other Malawian policymakers in health, education, gender and youth affairs, and finance and development planning. These interactions have taken the form of science-policy dialogues, round-table discussions, one-on-one meetings, and scientific conferences. As a result, policymakers have made health and population key pillars of the new *Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS III) 2017-2022*, which President Mutharika launched in March 2018.¹⁴ The research report behind this strategy found that limited access to family planning, early sexual debut among teenage girls, and early marriage were key drivers of high fertility in Malawi.¹⁵ To accelerate both fertility decline and good sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes, the report outlined key recommendations that the MGDS III incorporated.

First, the research report recommended that the government fully implement the *Family Planning 2020* commitments¹⁶ and the costed family planning strategy¹⁷ to ensure universal access to contraception, focusing especially on youth to delay the onset of childbearing. The MGDS III outlines promoting family planning and sexual and reproductive health rights and improving access, delivery, and utilization of SRH services to all. It also provides age-appropriate sex education for both in- and out-of-school youth.

Second, the report recommended that the government strengthen inter-sectoral coordination and governance of reproductive health programs and broad population issues, making them central to the development processes. This includes the creation of a National Population Council or an equivalent department within the National Planning Commission. The MGDS III outlines policy and legislative measures including developing a Population Act and a National Population Policy Framework, to address vulnerabilities caused by population aging, manage migration and urbanization, and enforce legislation against harmful practices such as child marriage.

Third, the report recommended scaling up mass education campaigns and empowerment of politicians, religious leaders, cultural leaders, the media, and civil society to champion women's rights, small family sizes, and the use of contraceptives. Accordingly, the MGDS III outlines increased awareness of population and development as a key outcome to be achieved through intensifying information education and communication.

Experts often fail to present their research to policymakers when they need it. The kind of alignment that occurred in Malawi—President Mutharika's appointment as the United Nations Champion for Youth and Demographic Dividend and Malawi's research focus on the demographic dividend—is rare. Researchers should seek to stay attuned to the policy environment for opportunities to strategically leverage key moments for communicating demographic dividend evidence.

Relationships

To effectively communicate their findings and get them into policy processes, experts should establish close relationships across various sectors. They also would do well to earn the trust of policymakers by conducting credible and robust research, and sharing useful analysis.

Kenya provides a useful case study in this regard. Kenya has a complex policy and political environment. However, demographic dividend experts have built strong relationships with mid-level policymakers at the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), a semi-autonomous government agency within the Ministry of Devolution and Planning, whose role is to coordinate population and development issues. These relationships have translated into a healthy demand for, and supply of, evidence on the demographic dividend.

For instance, in 2015 the NCPD collaborated with experts to conduct the *National Adolescent and Youth Survey (NAYS)* to identify challenges facing Kenyan youth at the sub-national level that could prevent the country from harnessing a demographic dividend.¹⁸ This two-way engagement process has given the agency ownership of the demographic dividend agenda. As a result, the NCPD has led the process of ensuring that *Kenya's Medium-Term Plan (MTP III) 2018-2022* includes the priority investments needed across various sectors to achieve *Kenya's Vision 2030*.

Survey findings indicated that one of the major barriers to youth absorption into the labor market was their lack of both professional and vocational skills.¹⁹ The MTP III, therefore, outlines investments in relevant training to improve human capital and meet labor market demands in areas such as construction, engineering, and technology through local and overseas training, as well as joint ventures with foreign firms.²⁰ The MTP III also commits the government to prioritizing Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which employ 14.9 million Kenyans and contribute approximately 29 percent of Kenya's GDP.²¹

Kenyan experts have learned that by creating and sustaining relationships through two-way engagements, policymakers take initiative in developing demographic dividend policy. However, these engagements between experts and mid-level policymakers have not translated into buy-in from senior policymakers, who control the budgetary process. Consequently, most government activities relating to the demographic dividend depend largely on external funding from non-state actors, which is not likely to be sustainable. To navigate this challenge, experts also need to build strong relationships with those who influence policymakers, such as legislative and personal assistants. By convincing those who interact with policymakers every day to become champions of the demographic dividend, experts have a better chance of getting the issue onto policymakers' high priority lists.

Building strong relationships with the media is also essential. The media can increase pressure on policymakers to review policies that are ineffective or implement those that are stalled. If well-informed, the media can also combat misinformation, and thus help to defuse controversies over issues such as the provision of age-appropriate sex education, a highly emotive issue in Kenya. However, experts should remember the media can be a double-edged sword: ill-informed journalists who do not understand the full picture may produce sensational reporting that undermines potentially good policy. Providing background briefings or seminars tailored specifically for media practitioners is therefore critical.

Finally, coalitions play a powerful role. Many voices from across sectors are contributing to setting the demographic dividend agenda in Africa. Experts with similar goals should, therefore, combine their efforts and break down information silos. In addition, getting research into policymaking spaces requires sustained, resource-intensive engagements. Strong coalitions will help ensure the drum keeps beating as long as necessary.

Conclusion

The demographic dividend provides an opportunity for African countries to mold their development trajectories. As emphasized by the *Africa Agenda 2063*, countries need to embrace self-reliance and self-determination by defining and financing their development decisions. Country-specific demographic dividend research provides pathways to achieve the medium and long-term growth that has eluded the continent for decades.

While the prospects for transforming Africa are promising, fulfilling these ambitions requires many elements, including the effective communication of research findings and close collaboration between those who

conduct and communicate research, and policymakers. Experts should develop well thought out messaging frameworks to encourage policymakers and other critical actors to formulate evidence-informed policies. Experts would do well to develop new terminology where necessary and devise alternative modes of engagement. They also need to leverage strategic opportunities by presenting research to policymakers at the right moment, when it has a real chance of informing policy. Developing and sustaining intentional relationships across different levels and sectors of government is also crucial. To magnify their influence, experts should consider forming strategic alliances with like-minded organizations and media practitioners.

African countries need to invest in their large youthful populations to ensure they become productive. This will not only fuel development but also curb violent extremism, crime, and other vulnerabilities that threaten national, regional, and global peace and security. It is therefore critical that experts communicate demographic dividend research clearly and consistently to policymakers and ensure they prioritize investments in their populations.

For a set of policy options and recommendations related to the demographic dividend and the research-to-policy ecosystem, see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 16 by Diana Warira.

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