Kenya: The Challenge of Implementing Demographic Dividend Policies

Could a collaborative approach to agenda-setting improve Kenya's prospects of implementing demographic dividend policies that spur economic growth?

KEY POINTS

- Despite evidence that points to an opportunity to accelerate economic growth in Kenya through targeted investments, the long-term and multipronged nature of the demographic dividend makes this largely researcher-driven policy agenda uniquely challenging to implement. Overall, the approaches promoted by evidence producers could be better aligned with the current needs and constraints of policymakers to yield political and legislative support.
- Informal relationships, rather than formal partnerships, are the dominant avenue through which demographic dividend policies have been promoted.
- Collaboration and structured partnerships between evidence producers and policymakers, such as policy roundtables and conferences, could help to better align research agendas with public priorities and more effectively promote the use of data and evidence in policy formulation and prioritization.

Background

Large youth populations are approaching working age in many African countries, including Kenya. If governments in these countries invest in youth education, health, and employment—and simultaneously spur a reduction in fertility rates—the change in the national population structure could result in a demographic dividend in the form of rapid economic growth. Using census and survey data and forecasting tools, prominent Kenyan research organizations have supported this hypothesis and noted that the time to act to exploit the opportunity in Kenya is now.

One key organization involved in this policy agenda setting is the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), a semiautonomous governmental agency under Kenya's Ministry of Devolution and Planning. The NCPD is the lead on population issues, including the prospect of a demographic dividend. In 2014, the NCPD partnered with Futures Group to forecast Kenya's demographic and economic changes, laying out four potential scenarios for 2050. The results show that under the best-case scenario, by following an integrated investment plan that focuses on both the social (education and family planning) and the economic policies, Kenya's GDP could grow by more than twelve times the 2014 levels. This would create an economic gain, or demographic dividend, of US$2,500 per person per annum at projected 2050 population levels.[1]

1. "Demographic Dividend Opportunities for Kenya," NCPD Policy Brief, July 2014.

Implementing Demographic Dividend Policies

The NCPD and other governmental and nongovernmental organizations have proposed policy recommendations for Kenya's government to realize the demographic dividend.[2] These include:

- Continuing to reduce fertility rates, through a combination of reductions in infant mortality and expanded contraceptive use, so that there are fewer children dependent on every Kenyan of working age. The 2012 population policy sets a total fertility rate (TFR) goal of 2.6 children per woman (compared to a TFR of 3.9 in 2014) and a national contraceptive prevalence rate of 70 percent by 2030 (currently at 58 percent).[3]

- Creating jobs for Kenya's youth, who face the highest level of unemployment at a rate of 25 percent and rising.[4] Expanding technical and vocational training programs is one way to help youth gain the skills they need to secure jobs in the formal sector.

The Challenge

Success in translating this data and evidence into usable policy recommendations has been limited. The recommendations laid out by research organizations like the NCPD rarely include concrete, numerical targets, making it difficult for policymakers to know exactly what needs to change and what it will take to harness the demographic dividend. Overall, the demographic dividend agenda has been driven largely by research organizations (both governmental and nongovernmental), without adequate attention to political priorities and to how data and evidence can be used to help policymakers further their existing initiatives.

The long-term and multipronged nature of the demographic dividend—which emphasizes coordinated social investments across multiple ministries—makes it a uniquely challenging policy agenda to implement. There is lack of consensus on what the demographic dividend in Kenya entails and how it relates to initiatives currently under way in family planning, education, skill development, and employment creation for youth. Faced with scarce time and resources, policymakers are likely to prioritize policies and programs that deliver results within Kenya's five-year election cycles. Further, programs in health, education, or employment that have traditionally existed in silos are often easier to implement compared to a policy or program that spans multiple sectors. The reasons for this include an absence of formalized structures and mechanisms that support cross-ministry collaboration and fragmented, sector-specific financing from international development partners.

Finally, Kenya's ongoing devolution of power from the national government to county governments has further complicated the ability of national actors, like the NCPD, to influence county-level actions. Given that individual counties are in different phases of development—fertility rates vary between rural and urban areas, for example—strong coordination between national and local actors is critical, yet national-level bodies, such as the NCPD, do not have the resources to fully engage in

2. Examples of organizations include the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), and the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA).
3. "Kenya Economic Report 2016: Fiscal Decentralization in Support of Devolution," Nairobi, Kenya: KIPPRA, 2016.
4. "Kenya Economic Report 2015: Empowering Youth through Decent and Productive Employment," Nairobi, Kenya: KIPPRA, 2015.

all of Kenya's forty-seven counties. Data and organizational capacity to inform and plan activities related to the demographic dividend vary widely across county governments. The National Youth and Adolescent Survey, implemented by the NCPD in 2015, was an attempt to create more data at the local level to inform county-specific policies for achieving the demographic dividend, but funding and local capacity constraints remain an issue in syncing action at the county level with national priorities.

The Importance of Partnerships

Success in translating this data and evidence into action and policy implementation has been limited. Although the NCPD is the leading governmental voice on population issues in Kenya, it lacks strong influence with its parent body, the Ministry of Devolution and Planning, and the wider cabinet.[5] It depends on informal relationships with supporters and champions, such as the Parliamentary Committee on Population and Development, to promote its core messages to other senior government leaders. These relationships require significant time and resources, a situation which is complicated by personnel turnover and competing political priorities. For example, while a previous United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) representative to Kenya was well connected to the First Lady and could promote the NCPD's work through informal channels, the organization now lacks access to a powerful audience, and its recommendations to advance the demographic dividend have stalled as a result.

The Significance of the National Development Strategy

Long-term development planning is guided by Kenya's Vision 2030. Ministries implement Vision 2030 in five-year medium-term plans (MTPs) that set priorities for ministry budgets and include flagship projects in the economic, social, and political areas. As a result, the MTPs are an essential avenue through which policymakers can reach out to researchers and prioritize initiatives based on evidence. However, as of March 2017, the ministry steering committee responsible for drafting the 2018–2022 plan had met only three times, with five to six additional meetings anticipated before its goal of publishing the results after the upcoming August 2017 presidential elections. Given this short timeline, the committee cannot commission new studies and collect data and evidence to inform policy considerations.

In addition to, and partially because of, its rushed timing, MTP development is not as inclusive a process as it could be. Ministries do not have a formal opportunity to present new research or justify the effectiveness of certain programs so that they may receive more attention or support in the next round. The Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA), an autonomous public think tank, is represented in the steering committee, but formal inclusion of or consultation with other research organizations is limited. Furthermore, the membership of the steering committee and its nineteen technical groups is not publicly available, making it difficult for outside actors to know who to contact or how to be involved.

5. The cabinet comprises the president, deputy president, attorney general, and cabinet secretaries.

Reflections

As Kenya's demographic dividend agenda illustrates, implementing a multisectoral and long-term policy agenda requires a collaborative and coordinated approach. Provision of data and evidence alone have been insufficient to influence policy implementation. The broader environment in which policy decisions are made—the institutional uncertainty associated with political transition, the way in which a policy agenda is communicated, and the partnerships between policymakers and the research community—are just as important as the credibility and implications of the evidence itself. We offer several observations about the challenge of implementing the demographic dividend policy in Kenya:

- *Stronger collaboration between decision makers and evidence producers is necessary to advance a policy agenda*. In general, research organizations can benefit from forming networks and strategic partnerships that expand their access to key policymakers. While the NCPD has limited access to top policymakers, KIPPRA has much greater influence. For example, KIPPRA's yearly economic reports, which made explicit arguments for the demographic dividend in 2015 and 2016, are prepared for parliament each year and discussed at the cabinet level. A closer partnership with KIPPRA, especially in disseminating research and policy recommendations, could assist the NCPD in achieving greater evidence uptake and more leverage in influencing policy.

- *Research should be aligned with policymaker priorities*. Evidence producers are prone to framing their findings in a way that best reflects their own priorities rather than the needs of policymakers. Being explicit about more concrete, numerical funding targets or outcome-level goals would make their recommendations more useful for policymakers in creating a vision of success and tracking progress. Policymakers can also do a better job of reaching out to evidence producers for help in breaking down high-level political priorities into properly sequenced actions and explicitly requesting needed research for policymaking.

- *Structured knowledge exchange opportunities could help elevate policy issues*. Policy roundtables or conferences with the Vision 2030 secretariat could help elevate demographic dividend policies to a national level in the next medium-term plan. Policy forums could be coordinated by each Vision 2030 technical group two to three years in advance of the next MTP and provide opportunities to identify promising areas for further research. This could allow the government to commission studies ahead of time to analyze the impact and cost-effectiveness of demographic dividend policy interventions.

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For more information, please see http://results4america.org/our-work/results-for-all/.

Further Reading

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