

Aging in Africa: past trends and future implications

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In the second half of the twentieth century, most of the Global South underwent a profound demographic transition. In virtually every country of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, a shift from high fertility and short life expectancy to much smaller families and longer survival has happened or is underway. The pace of this demographic transition is far quicker in the developing world than it was in the developed countries of Europe and North America. In France and the United States, it took almost 200 years for fertility to drop by 65%, and almost 100 years for life expectancy to increase 65%. Most of the developing world has seen the same magnitude of change in fertility and mortality in just 35 years [1-5].

Rapid declines in fertility and mortality lead directly to population aging. The United Nations projects that the world population aged 60 and older will grow by over 50% over the next 15 years. Most of the projected growth of the older population will take place in the Global South, which will include 80% of the older population by 2050. In the short run, the transition is producing a “demographic dividend,” as the relative number of dependent children declines. This period of low dependence will be brief; as twentieth-century birth cohorts enter old age, the expanding older dependent population will increasingly strain social resources [1-2].

The demographic transition is one aspect of broader economic and social transformations. Improvements in public health and family planning initiatives—along with rising standards of living, improved educational attainment, and rapid urbanization—contributed to the unprecedented demographic change. Per capita purchasing power in the Global South has grown an extraordinary 313% since 1990. The world population in extreme poverty dropped from 42% to 11% between 1981 and 2013. Health and education have improved dramatically; child mortality dropped 60% in the past five decades, and adult literacy almost doubled [6].

Not everyone has benefitted from these advances. Growing inequality within and between regions has left many behind, and the aging population is especially vulnerable. Many older people in rural villages have been literally left behind as their children have moved away, a reflection of remarkable growth in urbanization and migration. The high levels of demographic and economic growth are also contributing to alarming environmental degradation, often threatening the economies and health of those rural villages. Urban areas pose their own challenges for the aged, who can face impoverishment and slum conditions [7-11].

Despite its manifest significance, population aging in the Africa and other areas of the Global South is understudied, partly because of a dearth of suitable data. In most developing countries, older adults still represent a small minority of the population. Most demographic surveys in these countries focus on fertility and reproductive health, and they are usually too small to allow in-depth analysis of older populations. The few longitudinal aging surveys available for developing countries are invaluable for understanding individual-level aging processes of specific cohorts, but small samples and limited chronological depth limit their usefulness for studying the broader impacts of population aging [12].

Study of these trends requires access to consistent high-density data spanning the period of rapid demographic transition. This paper describes changes in population aging at sub-national levels among countries in Africa using census samples available through the IPUMS International census project. Through partnerships with collaborating national statistical offices, IPUMS provides access to large census samples suitable for study of sub-populations and with enhancements that facilitate cross-temporal analysis. Growing inequality within and between countries and regions has left many behind, and the aging population is especially vulnerable. Many older people in rural villages have been literally left behind as their children have moved

away, a reflection of remarkable growth in urbanization and migration. We intend this descriptive paper as a catalyst to further study and collaboration of the social and policy implications of aging populations.

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