

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12561-1 - Population and Development Projects in Africa

Edited by John I. Clarke, Mustafa Khogali and Leszek A. Kosinski

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# 1 The demographic background to development in Africa

---

*Aderanti Adepaju and  
John I. Clarke*

## Introduction

Development in Africa is not nearly as rapid as hoped for, and development projects are sporadic but not numerous, yet population growth is faster than anywhere else in the world and population redistribution is accelerating more than most countries would wish. The relationships between development and development projects on the one hand and rapid population growth and redistribution on the other are far from simple or stable in a continent with such strong spatial unevenness and heterogeneity of population geography and such remarkable diversity and fragmentation of political geography. Thus, in order to understand these relationships, and how Africa's many countries deal with them or think about them, it is important to consider the demographic background to development.

The bare facts are that with 513 million people (1983) Africa contains about 11 per cent of the world's inhabitants on 22 per cent of its land area and that the number of inhabitants is increasing by about 3 per cent each year – well above the world average of 1.8 per cent – owing to high fertility (the average birth rate is 46 per thousand) and relatively high but declining mortality (about 16 per thousand). The urban population, however, is growing much more quickly (about 7 per cent per annum), sustained by migration from rural areas and small towns to the major cities (Adepaju, 1982). Other pertinent characteristics common to Africa are under-development, polarized development and regional inequality, the inheritance of various forms of colonial domination which have shaped and continue to influence greatly the strategy and patterns of economic development as well as migration and spatial population distribution.

Behind these broad generalizations, however, there is considerable diversity in the size and spatial distribution of population, resource endowment, colonial experience, political systems, culture and level of development. The 53 countries and islands listed in Table 1.1 exhibit important variations in land area, population numbers, population density, level of urbanization and the rate of growth of both national and urban populations.

A very significant feature is the small population size of a large number of African countries (Clarke and Kosiński, 1982); in 1983, nearly one-quarter of

Table 1.1. Selected characteristics of the population of Africa

Region/country	Area (000 km <sup>2</sup> )	Population estimate Mid-1983 (millions)	Crude birth rate	Crude death rate	Rate of natural increase (annual, %)	Infant mortality rate	Urban population (%)	Persons per km <sup>2</sup> of arable land
World		4,677	29	11	1.8	84	39	98
More developed		1,158	15	10	0.6	19	70	59
Less developed		3,519	33	12	2.1	93	29	128
Africa	30,319	513	46	16	3.0	120	27	50
<i>Northern Africa</i>		120	44	13	3.1	109	42	95
Algeria	2,382	20.7	46	14	3.2	116	52	44
Egypt	1,001	45.9	43	12	3.1	102	44	1,533
Libya	1,760	3.3	47	13	3.4	99	52	33
Morocco	447	22.9	44	13	3.1	106	41	107
Sudan	2,506	20.6	47	17	3.0	123	25	62
Tunisia	164	6.8	35	10	2.5	98	52	87
<i>Western Africa</i>		155	49	18	3.1	139	22	74
Benin	113	3.8	49	19	3.0	153	14	372
Cape Verde	4	0.4	28	9	1.8	81	20	526
Gambia	11	0.6	49	28	2.1	197	18	105
Ghana	239	13.9	48	16	3.2	102	36	90
Guinea	246	5.4	46	21	2.5	164	19	72
Guinea Bissau	36	0.8	40	21	1.9	147	24	52
Ivory Coast	322	8.9	47	18	2.9	126	38	72
Liberia	111	2.1	47	15	3.2	153	33	315
Mali	1,240	7.3	47	21	2.6	153	17	21
Mauritania	1,030	1.8	50	22	2.8	142	23	4
Niger	1,267	6.1	51	22	2.9	145	13	46
Nigeria	924	84.2	50	17	3.3	134	20	178
Senegal	196	6.1	48	22	2.6	146	33	72
Sierra Leone	72	3.8	45	19	2.6	206	25	129
Togo	56	2.8	48	18	3.0	108	17	162
Upper Volta	274	6.8	48	22	2.6	210	9	37



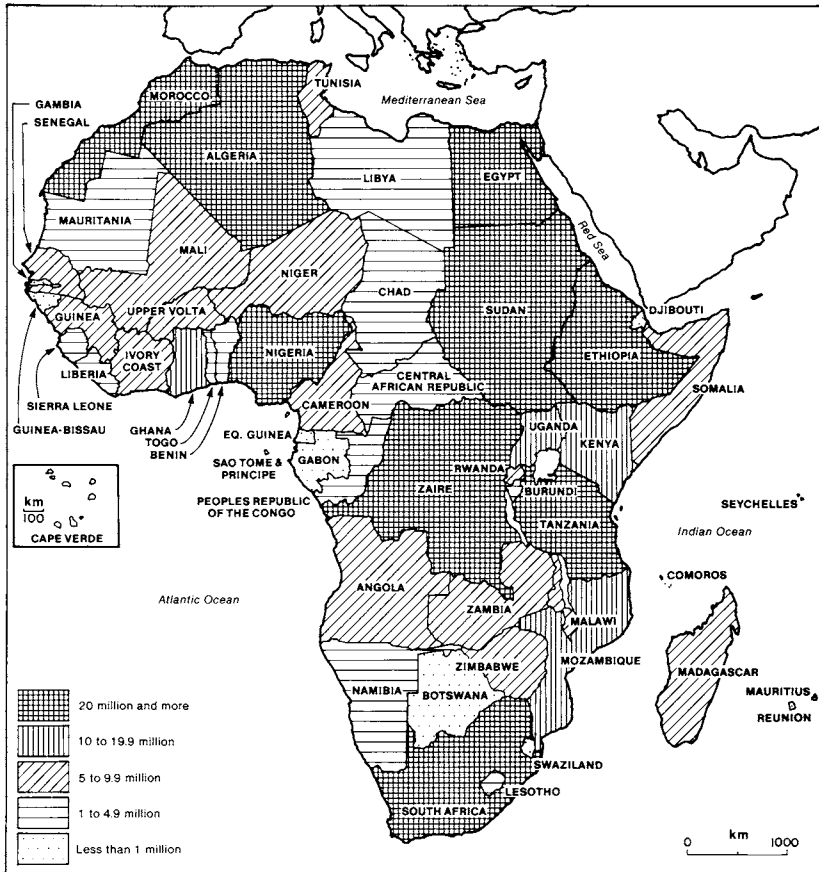


Fig. 1.1 Population sizes of African countries, 1983

them had less than one million inhabitants each (Fig. 1.1). In contrast, the combined populations of Nigeria and Egypt, the two largest in Africa, account for about one-quarter of the total population of the continent. Moreover, in terms of areal size Sudan is at one extreme with about 1 million square miles whereas countries like Cape Verde, Djibouti, Gambia, Mauritius, Reunion and Swaziland have less than 10,000 square miles. Obviously, the population/area relationships of countries greatly influence population redistribution within the continent, and there are marked contrasts between the macro- and micro-states, however defined. In general, the smaller countries, in area and population, have not only greater demographic volatility through more rapidly changing vital rates and a greater impact of external migration, but also pose quite different problems for economic development. With smaller resource bases, less complex spatial patterns and more limited economies, they are generally less viable and are more vulnerable to external pressures than the larger countries of Africa. The latter, however, have their own difficulties of internal heterogeneity, especially of multifarious ethnic

groups, and a major problem in maintaining national unity. They are also perhaps fortunate (though some might dispute this) in that many of the development strategies implemented in developing countries, including those of Africa, have had the meso- and macro-states in mind, rather than the micro-states with which Africa abounds.

But size is not everything. Sharp contrasts also exist between on the one hand the relatively prosperous and less precarious coastal countries, where cash cropping and commercial economies evolved, and on the other the mainly poorer countries of the interior, where subsistence economies have often prevailed. These broad coastal/interior contrasts are reflected in the distribution of main cities, which, with the exception of a few land-locked countries in West Africa, are mostly located in coastal countries (E.C.A., 1972; Udo, 1979).

The 14 land-locked countries, of course, suffer particular problems of access and distance to the sea, high levels of contiguity with other states and political vulnerability to stronger neighbours. It is not surprising that of the 31 countries designated least developed (L.L.D.C.s) or 'poorest of the poor' by the United Nations, 21 are in Africa, and that 10 of these are land-locked (Fig. 1.2). Indeed, Mali has been designated as the poorest country in the world. Furthermore, 33 of the 53 countries in the world that the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (U.N.F.P.A.) has selected as priority countries are in Africa; selection being on the basis of GNP *per capita* of US\$ 500 or less, and two of the following:

- annual increase of at least 100,000 inhabitants;
- gross reproduction rate of 2.5 or more;
- infant mortality rate of 160 or more;
- density of agricultural population per hectare of arable land of 2 or more.

The priority group had a population of 223 million in 1980, almost 48 per cent of the African population, and excluded most of the countries of Northern and Southern Africa.

Few African countries find themselves at the other end of the economic scale, but a diverse group of oil- or mineral-rich countries including Libya, Gabon, South Africa and Algeria are much more fortunate (Fig. 1.2), although such economies have their own particular problems, in particular the reliance upon immigrant labour.

So there is much diversity within the unity of population geography in Africa, and generalizations usually require qualification.

### Spatial population distribution

A mere glance at a map of population distribution of Africa reveals a marked patchiness at the macro- and micro-levels. At the macro-level there are massive contrasts, as between the oppressive densities in the Nile delta and the virtual absence of population in the neighbouring Sahara desert, but equally at the micro-

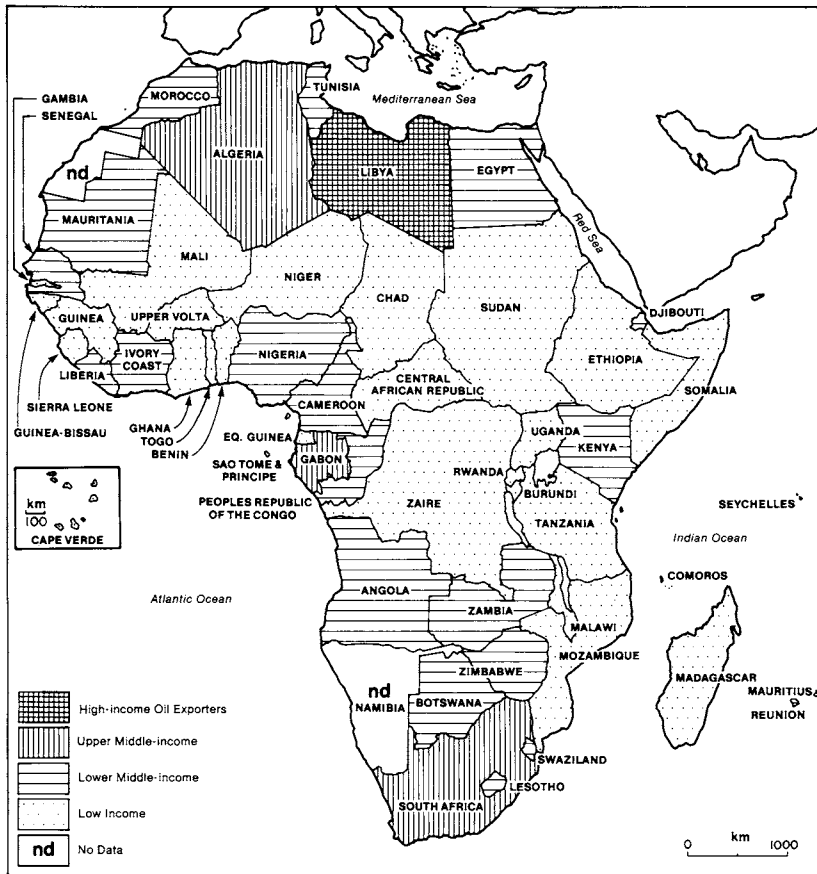
6 *Adepoju and Clarke*

Fig. 1.2 World Bank classification of African countries, 1983

level there are also great contrasts, as between the concentrations in mining centres or irrigation projects and the sparse densities of nomadic grazing areas (Clarke, 1975).

The details of the pattern of population distribution need not concern us here, but the most important recent change has been the growing concentration in towns and cities. Compared with other major world regions, Africa has one of the lowest proportions of population (27 per cent) living in urban areas, a little ahead of South Asia, where about one-quarter of the population is classified as urban. On the other hand, since the second half of this century, the level of urbanization in Africa has shown a consistently upward trend (U.N., 1980). The rate of growth of the urban population in Africa is by far the highest among the world regions; the growth rate of 5 per cent per year during the 1960–70 decade increased to 7 per cent during the 1970–75 period. The rapid urban growth results from a combination of high natural increase and accelerated in-migration to towns. In 1950, only 15 per cent, or about 32 million, of Africa's population lived in urban

## Demographic background

7

Table 1.2. *Percentage of population living in urban areas: Africa and other regions, 1950–2000*

Region	Year						
	1950	1960	1970	1975	1980	1990	2000
World total	28.9	33.9	37.5	39.3	41.3	45.9	51.3
<i>Africa</i>	14.5	18.2	22.9	25.7	28.9	35.7	42.3
Eastern Africa	5.5	7.5	10.7	13.2	16.1	22.7	29.4
Middle Africa	14.6	18.1	25.2	29.7	34.4	43.7	51.6
Northern Africa	24.5	29.8	36.6	40.1	43.8	51.4	58.3
Southern Africa	37.3	41.7	43.8	44.8	46.5	51.5	57.9
Western Africa	10.2	13.5	17.3	19.6	22.3	28.6	35.9
<i>Other regions</i>							
Latin America	41.2	49.4	57.4	61.2	64.7	70.7	75.2
Northern America	63.8	67.1	70.4	72.0	73.7	77.2	80.8
East Asia	16.7	24.7	28.6	30.7	33.0	38.6	45.4
Southern Asia	15.6	17.8	20.4	22.0	23.9	29.1	36.1
Europe	53.7	58.4	63.9	66.4	68.8	73.2	77.1
Oceania	61.2	66.2	70.8	73.3	75.9	80.4	83.0
U.S.S.R.	39.3	48.8	56.7	60.9	64.8	71.3	76.1

Source: U.N. (1980)

areas. By 1980 this percentage had nearly doubled and about 133 million lived in towns; but by the end of this century there may be 350 million urban dwellers, about 42 per cent of the total population. Even then Africa will still be one of the least urbanized of world regions, although there is a remarkable variation between African regions (1980), ranging from only 16 per cent in Eastern Africa and 22 per cent in Western Africa to 47 per cent in Southern Africa and 44 per cent in Northern Africa (Table 1.2). The non-tropical areas distinguished themselves in this respect, as in many other ways (Fig. 1.3).

In spite of this high growth rate of the urban centres, Africa's rural population has been increasing steadily at close to 2 per cent per annum, making it the fastest growing after that of South Asia among the world regions. This is in spite of the increasing rural exodus of youths at the prime of both reproductive and productive periods, and, in particular, the dislocating effects of out-migration on marriage patterns and family organization in rural areas.

### Explanations of population distribution

The prevailing patterns of population distribution and migration in Africa have been greatly influenced by historical and demographic factors, physical and ecological conditions and the process of economic development, including the impact of imported technology on the African society (Udo, 1979; Gosling, 1979).

Historical factors such as slavery have laid bold and, some argue, long-term



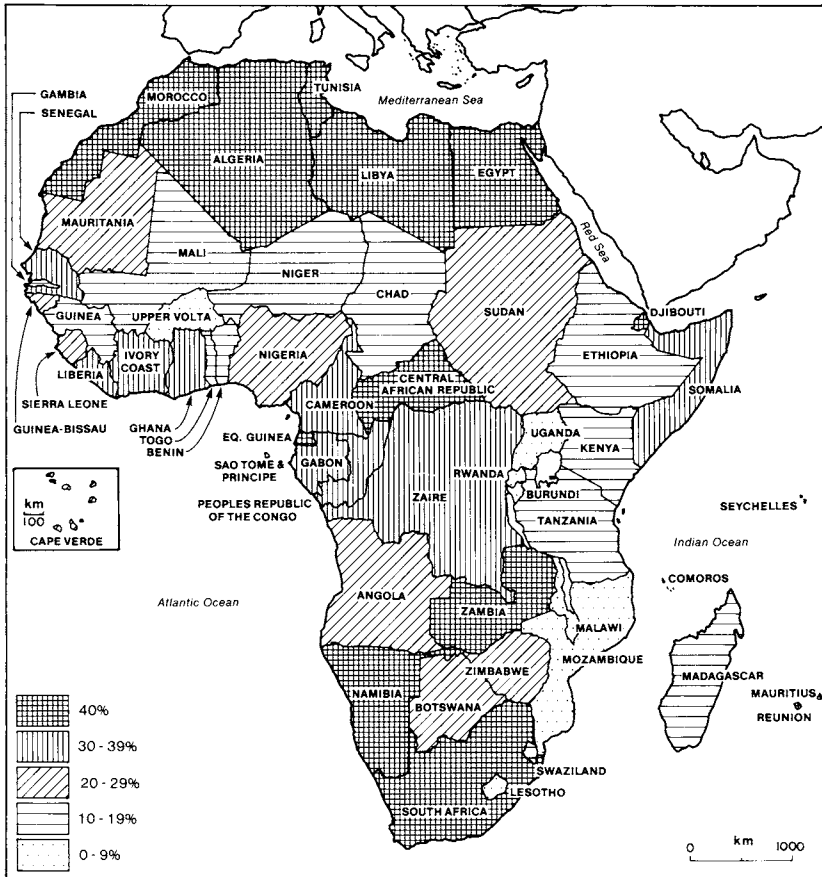


Fig. 1.3 Levels of urbanization in African countries, *c.* 1980

imprints on the spatial distribution and population growth in various parts of the continent. According to Udo (1979: 67), 'The sparse population of parts of sub-Saharan Africa has often been attributed to the loss of population during the period of the slave trade.' The demographic effects of the slave trade in the source areas are apparent in the relative stagnation of the population during the slave trade, implying that the slave trade 'pulled off enough people, and disrupted the lives of enough others, to essentially stop population growth for about 200 years' (Franke, 1981: 18). This is especially the case of the 'middle belt' countries of West Africa, as well as Gabon, Angola and northern Sudan.

Without entering into details, we may also point to the influence of the immense profusion of African ethnic groups upon population distribution, notably in the zone of cultural fragmentation stretching across the tropical zone from Senegal to Ethiopia. Their bewildering diversity of numbers, customs, settlement forms and economies has long imposed a strong influence upon the overall and local patterns of population, and the ethnic heterogeneity of countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia and Uganda have had centrifugal effects which have been difficult to resist.



## Demographic background

9

Population distribution in Africa also results from demographic factors. In spite of the rapid population growth rate, pockets of infertility are found in the countries of Central Africa (Zaire, Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic, northern Cameroon), parts of West Africa (Upper Volta, Senegal), as well as Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, where the low fertility and low rates of population growth have been factors in low population density. This, according to Franke (1981: 13–14) is ‘one of the mysteries of African demography; the existence, on a continent with otherwise very high fertility, of a belt of very low fertility’. The low fertility is usually attributed to high incidence of venereal disease (Adadevoh, 1979); it is also possible that poor nutrition is a contributory factor. In any case, the high fertility/infertility phenomenon has resulted in varying levels of population growth.

The high degree of population concentration in Africa’s cities has been fostered by the rapidly increasing migration from rural areas and small urban places as well as the prevailing high fertility. The former results from both economic and political factors. The location of economic opportunities (Mortimore, 1982) and especially the development of trade along coastal areas has usually exerted a strong impact on migration and population distribution. As Hoover (1972: 653) noted, ‘policies involving the location of investment and employment affect the geographical distribution of different labour market destinations for migrants’. The economic factors are primary; both incomes and living conditions are higher in urban than in rural areas. Urban areas have become industrial, commercial and administrative centres; these have, in turn, attracted migrants from the poor rural areas. The result is the primacy of major cities in Africa and their growing supremacy over the numerical size and importance of small and medium-sized towns (Gugler and Flanagan, 1978). The high degree of population concentration in Africa’s cities is especially noticeable in Malawi, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Guinea and Sierra Leone, where over 80 per cent of the urban population live in the major cities; in countries like Mauritius, Tanzania, Tunisia, Sudan, Upper Volta and Mozambique, however, 50 per cent or less of the urban population live in the main cities.

The colonial development strategy in African countries was systematically geared towards the exploitation of the local resources for the use of the metropolitan countries, the link between them being the many city-ports around the coasts. As a result, the strategy of selective development of areas of abundant resources – mines, cash cropping areas, plantations, etc. – was adopted and rigorously pursued. In Zambia, for instance, the line of rail became the zone of major population settlement (Ohadike, 1981), as in the case of the development of the Lagos/Port Harcourt/Kano axes in Nigeria. The strong urban bias pursued in the planning strategies of independent African governments was also influential in provoking primate cities, such as Dakar, Freetown, Abidjan and Nairobi, to emerge as dominant in their urban hierarchies, serving as administrative, political, commercial and educational centres. Consequently, the absence or relative unimportance of medium-sized towns is characteristic of the urban population

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12561-1 - Population and Development Projects in Africa

Edited by John I. Clarke, Mustafa Khogali and Leszek A. Kosinski

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Adepoju and Clarke*

scene in Africa, though in small countries like Gambia, Swaziland, Djibouti and Gabon one such town performs the function of capital.

Environmental and ecological conditions also contribute to the prevailing population distribution in Africa, but they have been variously utilized and modified during colonial and post-colonial times. For example, widespread diseases and pests occur. Hence, 'vast areas of Africa, especially Zaire, West Africa, Gabon and Zambia, are infested with tsetse fly and other diseases which lead to depopulation in the affected areas' (Udo, 1979: 66). The same observation applies to the Volta Basin in Ghana, and to parts of Benin, Togo, Niger, Upper Volta, Ivory Coast and Mali infested by river blindness. However, the impact of imported technology on population distribution in Africa is seen in the transformation of hitherto uninhabitable land into areas suitable for human habitation, as in the areas formerly infested with tsetse fly, river blindness, trypanosomiasis and other diseases.

It is also evident that the dry savanna and desert zones of the interior are usually sparsely populated and are invariably uninhabitable for the greater part of the year (E.C.A., 1972). Most of the Sahelian regions of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan are in this situation. As Udo (1979) asserted, 'aridity is the single most important environmental factor which has made vast areas of West Africa, East Africa and South Africa unsuitable for human settlement'.

Somalia and Sudan are examples of countries with large nomadic populations which roam the widespread but sparsely inhabited semi-arid and arid lands. It is estimated, for instance, that over two-thirds of the population of Somalia are nomads (I.L.O./J.A.S.P.A., 1977). In general, nomadic, animal-herding societies have lower fertility than settled, agrarian ones (Franke, 1981), a factor which further limits population density.

In Swaziland, as in Somalia, both the cattle and the human population share the limited agricultural land. Indeed, the national average for cattle holding, of 34 head per sq km, in Swaziland is the highest cattle density in Africa, and is even higher on Swazi land (51 per sq km) on which 83 per cent of the total cattle are found and where there is over-grazing and considerable soil erosion (Government of Swaziland, 1978: 6). At the time of independence in 1968, 45 per cent of the land was owned by foreigners, mostly white settlers. The prevailing large-scale farming of cash crops for export resulted in low population density on these farms. Even by 1978, up to 17 per cent of the land was still owned by expatriates.

Similarly, during the colonial era in Kenya population density was lowest in the 'scheduled areas' and 'white highlands' where most of the white settlers lived, and highest among the African settlements. Comparable situations prevailed in Zambia and Zimbabwe prior to independence, and continue to exist in South Africa, where the policy of separate development involves the creation of 'homelands' in various parts of the country, resulting in the arbitrary allocation of 70 per cent of the population to 13 per cent of its territory, which includes the poorest areas of land.