

Key Actions for Enhancing the Communication of Demographic Dividend Research to Improve Policymaking in Africa

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Africa has a large youthful population. In 2015, 19 percent of the world's 1.2 billion youth population aged 15-24 years lived in Africa.¹ By 2030, this youth population of 226 million in Africa is projected to grow by 42 percent.² This fast-growing population could transform the continent, but only if policymakers, researchers, and other development experts collaborate to create the necessary policy frameworks. Over the past five years, regional leaders have repeatedly committed to leveraging the potential of their young population, culminating in the 2017 African Union (AU) Summit on "Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth."³ However, most countries are still not prioritizing public policies that address critical sectors such as education, job creation, health, and good governance. If policymakers neglect these investments, their countries risk not only losing valuable human capital, but also jeopardizing peace and security as unemployed youth may resort to crime, violent extremism, and other vices.

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 working-age population (15-64 years) grows larger relative to the young, dependent population. More people in the labor force with fewer children to support can provide countries with a window of opportunity for accelerated economic growth.³ However, if governments do not enact policies that prioritize the right investments at the right time, they will miss this unique opportunity.

Case Studies of Effective Communication of Demographic Dividend Research

Policymakers in Uganda, Malawi, and Kenya have made progress with aligning medium and long-term development plans within a demographic dividend framework. Researchers in these countries have evaluated the investments needed to leverage the potential of their large youthful populations, but incorporating this research into policy requires collaboration between policymakers and experts. To communicate effectively, experts need to bridge the gap between research and policy by using three essential strategies: strategic timing, culturally appropriate framing, and sustained relationships.

¹See "Final Declaration: Investing in Youth for Accelerated Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development," *African Union*, December 7, 2017. The joint declarations include: *Addis Ababa Declaration on Population and Development in Africa Beyond 2014*; the *African Union (AU) Common African Position (CAP) on the Post 2015 Development Agenda*; and *Africa Agenda 2063—The Africa We Want*, African Union Commission, September 2015. See also United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) East and Southern Africa Regional Office, "Synthesis Report on the Demographic Dividend in Africa," May 2015.

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Timing: In Malawi, researchers' leveraged the appointment of President Mutharika as the United Nations Champion for Youth and Demographic Dividend Researchers to build on his high-level commitment and drive the demographic dividend agenda in Malawi, as well as systematically and regularly engaging with other Malawian policymakers. As a result of this specific window and engagement with experts, the Malawi's Parliament formed the Caucus on Population and Development which facilitated a better understanding of the demographic dividend among its members. Policymakers also integrated Health and Population as one of the key pillars of the *Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS III) 2017-2022*, which outlines key strategies for addressing prevailing challenges which could prevent Malawi from harnessing a demographic dividend, such as high population growth, teenage pregnancies, and child marriage.⁴

Framing: In Uganda, experts framed their research to convince President Yoweri Museveni that Uganda would not achieve the country's development strategy, *Vision 2040*, if the population growth rate continued to soar. Museveni, a long-term proponent of population growth, has since committed his government to investments in family planning.⁵ Consequently, Uganda launched the *Family Planning Implementation Plan 2015-2020*, which seeks to reduce the huge unmet need for family planning.⁶

Relationships: In Kenya, experts have worked closely with mid-level policymakers and these relationships have translated into a healthy demand for and supply of evidence on the demographic dividend. Experts collaborated with these policymakers to identify challenges facing Kenyan youth at the sub-national level that could prevent the country from harnessing a demographic dividend, as well as potential solutions.⁷ These policymakers then led the process of ensuring that development plans within Kenya's *Vision 2030* strategy incorporated policies needed to harness the demographic dividend, such as providing youth with quality education and training in economically vital areas like engineering and construction.⁸

Policy Options and Recommendations

1. For Demographic Dividend Researchers and Development Experts

- a. Time advocacy to take advantage of policy and political openings:** Policymakers and political leaders are more likely to pay attention to policy options emerging from research if this information aligns with their current political needs and priorities. Experts should stay current with the policy and political landscape of a particular country, and maintain relevancy on pressing policy issues, as well as long-term development strategies. Experts would do well to form and maintain relationships with policymakers to become trusted sources of policy research. For researchers, this could mean forming topic-specific ad-hoc working groups with policymakers that focus on varying policy related topics such as health and education, among others.
- b. Frame messages to fit the cultural context:** Experts should preference a participatory approach to develop and implement context-specific messaging frameworks. For instance, when engaging policymakers on family planning, experts should consider alternative terminology and explanations that are culturally sensitive—such as 'birth-spacing' instead of 'family planning.' Experts could also use community ambassadors such as cultural or religious leaders who understand the benefits of the demographic dividend to deliver messages. The use of local ambassador-type programs could help bridge barriers within communities and foster mutually-beneficial relationships between researchers and the people they are working to serve.
- c. Build strong relationships and coalitions:** Experts should consider establishing and sustaining strong relationships with policymakers and political leaders in their area of interest. Experts should explore various avenues for streamlining demographic dividend research into policy and political discussions. This includes one-on-one meetings with policymakers and political leaders, roundtable discussions, and inviting policymakers and political

leaders to scientific conferences. By providing concise, digestible informational materials, researchers support policymakers in their work and add value to these relationships.

Further, experts could build partnerships with other sectors to advocate for the use of demographic dividend research in policymaking processes. This includes building strong relationships with media practitioners and leveraging their agenda-setting and watchdog roles. Experts could offer resources to the media to help understand what the demographic dividend is, why it should be a high priority issue for Africa, and what actions policymakers should take.

2. For African Governments and Policymakers

a. Activate and enhance participation in research-to-policy discourse: Policymakers and political leaders should seek existing research to inform ongoing policy and development discussions. Policymakers and politicians would do well to consult with demographic dividend experts and researchers to help contextualize current issues, and also gain background knowledge for evidence-informed policymaking. Countries should consider creating or strengthening legislative and ministerial research departments and ensure that they not only conduct research, but also tap into existing policy-relevant research by both state and non-state actors. This could be carried out through regular expert briefing meetings. Since the agenda on the demographic dividend has already been set at the country and continental levels, policymakers and other leaders should seek technical assistance from demographic dividend experts on how to understand the details of the investments needed, and how to plan and implement those investments. In order to facilitate conversations on sensitive issues and find common solutions that account for cultural, religious, and other social norms, African governments could consider convening special policy dialogues including technical working groups.

For an in-depth analysis of the role of communications in policymaking, specifically for the demographic dividend in Africa see accompanying Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Research Paper No. 22 by Diana Warira.

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