

Why is no one counting in Africa anymore?

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DEMOGRAPHY, which was in the forefront of development policy during the first decades after decolonisation, has lost its position as the number one development issue.

Among the reasons for this are the progressive stabilisation of the world population and the acceleration of demographic transition in certain developing countries (China, India, and Latin American countries); the emergence of new challenges for the international community, and; the alliance of Christian and Muslim fundamentalists to limit women's rights and oppose the installation of contraceptive programmes.

The change of priorities is particularly alarming for sub-Saharan Africa, which is experiencing an atypical demographic transition and changes compared to those in the rest of the world.

Many African countries, among them the poorest in the world, such as Niger, Burundi and Somalia, are experiencing exponential population growth.

According to current UN projections, the total population of Africa will grow from the current 751 million to a figure ranging from 1.5 to 2 billion in 2050.

Such developments do not just put off to the remote future the dividends – mainly economic – of the demographic transition. This demographic explosion also poses nearly insurmountable problems for countries already among the poorest in the world: in terms of management of arable lands and agricultural resources; construction of schools and health centres, and; an increase in poverty and social inequality.

All of these factors would result in increases in migratory pressures towards areas rich in natural resources, or to Europe.

African countries and the international community must unite to manage the inescapable consequences of this rapid population growth. This will have to go hand-in-hand with an urgent relaunch of demographic programmes and research projects.

Demography also needs to be taken into account in all areas of policy in order to define more rapidly what are the needs of the population, and to work upstream to support sensitisation of the challenges of rapid population growth.

Access to reproductive health resources needs to be established as a human right for all men and women. That must include the right to choose whether or not to have more children, and in conditions that do not endanger the lives of mothers.

Health programmes, particularly in western and central Africa, are vital to treat the causes of infant mortality. Existing health systems need to be strengthened and reproductive health, maternal and child health, and the care of people living with AIDS, need to be integrated into these systems.

Finally, and most controversially, promotion of condom-use as a means of contraception needs to be studied. If not, then all the efforts and successes achieved in the development arena will be called into question.