





21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development and Transformations: Geographical Perceptions

Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku (Eds.)

Preface by Elena dell'Agnese

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# 14. The African geopolitical landscape: between demography and development

Giuseppe Terranova

# 14. The African geopolitical landscape: between demography and development

Giuseppe Terranova<sup>1</sup>

#### **Abstract**

Alarmist predictions of an exponential increase in Africa's population to 4 billion by 2100 are not borne out by the statistical data available to the international scientific community. In 1972, the Club of Rome, a nongovernmental scientific association, published its report *The Limits to Growth*. It was based on a Malthusian approach and warned of the serious risk that high levels of consumption caused by population growth, particularly in Africa, would lead to economic collapse. Now the Club of Rome has revised this prediction and announced that the demographic bomb may never explode, at least not in the catastrophic way predicted by various international bodies and experts. It is estimated that the population of sub-Saharan Africa could peak as early as 2060. This is 40 years earlier than predicted by the UN. Africa's population growth is still high, but Africa's fertility rate is falling faster than expected, following a dynamic seen in East Asian countries in the recent past as a result of economic development in recent years. The aim of this paper is to analyse the unexpected evolution of Africa's demographic development from a geopolitical perspective. And whether and in what way it is a sign of economic development, which, although uneven, may favour a more widespread level of prosperity, historically associated with a decline in fertility. It is a scenario that would be a game-changer for Africa's geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Africa, demography, development, geopolitics, Malthus.

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#### 1. Introduction

Population geography has its origins in Greek proto-geography. Aristotle, for instance, conducted studies on the relationships between demographic and environmental dynamics, as well as the structures of a population and the territory it occupies. It is a discipline that remains relevant today, just as it was in the past, for understanding the evolution and dynamics of the relationship between humans and nature within a specific space.

This aspect is also crucial from a geopolitical perspective. Population geography has domestic and international geopolitical consequences, influencing political, economic, and social balances, as well as the weight and role of each state. It also impacts migration flows, the sustainability of welfare and health systems, and relations between old and new generations, as well as between emerging and dominant powers (Terranova, 2023). For these reasons, this paper employs the aforementioned analytical methodology to explore the dynamics of the demographic landscape of the African continent.

There are at least three reasons why Africa has been chosen as the subject of this work. The first relates to its distant past, specifically the impact of the slave trade on African demography from the early 1500s to the late 1800s. (Sale, 2020).

The second reason relates to its recent past, particularly the alarmist predictions since the 1970s suggesting that Africa's high birth rates posed a risk of turning it into a demographic bomb (Meadows, 1972).

The third reason pertains to its present, which, according to official statistics, appears to contradict the aforementioned predictions. The objective of this paper is to analyze, from a geopolitical perspective, whether and how the unexpected evolution of Africa's demographics is influenced by positive factors, such as economic development, historically recognized as a potent contraceptive in many countries. (Bolaffi & Terranova, 2019).

### 2. The demographic landscape of Africa: from the slave trade to the limits to growth

The demographic landscape of Africa has been significantly shaped by the actions of various foreign geopolitical actors over the years. The slave trade, predominantly orchestrated by Western powers and Arab kingdoms for centuries, played a crucial role in the depopulation of the continent until the early 20th century (Sale, 2020).

Between the second half of the 16th century and the end of the 19th century, approximately 12 million Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas and the Caribbean through the so-called Atlantic trade. The peak of African human trafficking occurred between 1760 and 1840. This surge was attributed to the limited impact of the British Empire's trade prohibition (from 1807), as smuggling persisted and was encouraged by the Portuguese. Moreover, between the 10th and 20th centuries, approximately 7.5 million Africans were forcibly deported from the sub-Saharan region to the shores of the Mediterranean. In addition to these figures, approximately 6 million African slaves were deported after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 via the Indian Ocean trade, which utilized the Sultanate of Zanzibar as its primary hub. (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2012; Cooper, 2002).

The African continent stood as the sole exception globally, experiencing no population growth from the early 16th century to the late 19th century. Throughout these extended periods, it was trade, rather than inherent backwardness, that led to stagnation in African populations. Trafficking also disrupted gender and generational relations, particularly impacting the stronger and more fertile young adults.

The African continent witnessed significant population growth only after the end of the slave trade and the onset of the decolonization process. Africa's population expanded from 120 million to nearly 200 million between 1900 and 1950 (Cameron & Neal, 1997). From 1950 to 1955, Africa ranked as the third region globally in terms of fertility, following Latin America, the Caribbean, and Oceania. Subsequently, it emerged as the leader, reaching its peak between 1980 and 1985 with a fertility rate of 2.85%.

The robust demographic growth in Africa and beyond during the second half of the 20th century spurred the widespread dissemination of demographic theories and projections rooted in a Malthusian theoretical approach. Robert Malthus, a pioneer in the 18th century, formulated a model for understanding demographic dynamics at the societal level, based on two key principles: population is inevitably constrained by the means of subsistence, and unless effectively restrained by moral factors, population tends to increase exponentially in relation to the means of subsistence.

This is why he often reiterated that the growth of population is geometric, while that of subsistence is merely arithmetic. The notion that human population was expanding too rapidly permeated public opinion to such an extent that it became widely held (Roll, 1980). Malthus's theories also gained significant traction in the academic sphere and were incorporated into numerous scientific texts. One notable example is Paul Ehrlich's

The Population Bomb, where the author revisits, updates, and amplifies Malthus's theories, going as far as predicting severe famine in the late 1970s due to the inability of world food production to cope with the exponential increase in population (Ehrlich, 1968). Notably, the influential report The Limits to Growth, published by the Club of Rome in 1972, was grounded in this theory (Meadows, 1972). The Club of Rome is a non-governmental organization comprising academics and scientists from diverse disciplines. Established in 1968 at the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome, it has been based in Winterthur, Switzerland since 2008. The report's central thesis, widely accepted internationally, predicted the imminent depletion of the Earth's natural resources due to the exponential growth of the world's population.

We now know that the Club of Rome's thesis has not been borne out by the facts. The world's population has grown from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 8 billion today, and there is no shortage of resources to feed it. Food crises and famines, when they occur today, are often the result of geopolitical tensions (consider the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, two of the world's largest producers of wheat and fertilizers) and inequalities between the global North and South, rather than the inability of our production systems to guarantee essential goods for all the planet's inhabitants. This is because over the past 200 years, human population growth has been accompanied by significant advances in living standards and health: longer lives, healthier children, better education, shorter working weeks, and numerous other improvements (Spears, 2023). As the American political scientist Jack Goldstone has argued, the acceleration of technological development, especially since the Second World War, has led not to a shortage of food, but rather to a lack of economic resources to buy it (Goldstone, 2010).

### 3. Global population trends and the Africa's new demographic landscape.

The current geography and geopolitics of the world's population reveal not only that there is no shortage of resources to support the eight billion people on the planet but also a general slowdown in global population growth. According to United Nations data for two sample five-year periods, 1975-80 and 2005-10, the planet's total fertility declined by approximately 35%, and in countries where Islam is the majority religion, for example, it is around 40% lower. In the period 2005-2010, the fertility rate was 1.8 children per woman in Iran, 2.1 in Turkey and 2.8 in Egypt. These figures mark a significant departure from the levels of 6, 4.5 and 5.5 respectively in the five-

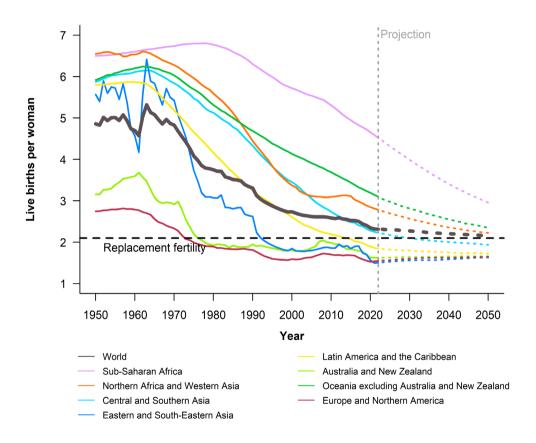
year period 1975-1980. The majority of people now live in countries where two or fewer children are born for every two adults. If all people in the United States today lived through their reproductive years and had children at the average rate, the result would be about 1.66 births per woman. The figure is 1.5 in Europe, 1.2 in East Asia and 1.9 in Latin America. Any global average of less than two children per two adults indicates a declining population, and in the long run each new generation will be smaller than the one before.

Western countries have been experiencing a demographic winter for decades. According to many scientists, declining mortality rates are the main cause of the unprecedented changes that, within a few decades, have disrupted the millennia-old relationship between age groups and generations - a genuine mass postponement of death. What used to happen for centuries, with the younger generation taking over and replacing the previous one every 25 years, is no longer happening. And it is likely to happen even less in the future. (Bolaffi, 2008).

More importantly, states in the so-called Global South, encompassing developing countries and emerging powers alternative to those in the West, are not yet facing a true demographic winter, but they are indeed undergoing a notable slowdown in population growth (Geruso & Spears, 2023). Consider China, which recently ceded its historic record as the world's most populous country to India, although India's population growth is also slowing. According to United Nations projections, India's population is expected to reach 1428.6 million by 2023, surpassing China's 1425.7 million. China's population is expected to decline for the first time in more than six decades. In 1971, China and India had almost identical levels of total fertility, with just under six births per woman over a lifetime. Fertility in China fell sharply to less than three births per woman by the end of the 1970s. In contrast, India's fertility decline was more gradual; it took three and a half decades for India to achieve the same fertility decline that China experienced in just seven years in the 1970s (UNFPA, 2023). By 2022, China's fertility rate of 1.2 births per woman was one of the lowest in the world; India's fertility rate of 2.0 births per woman was just below the replacement level of 2.1. According to the latest United Nations projections, India's population is expected to peak around 2064 and then gradually decline (Terranova, 2023).

The African continent is not an exception in the global demographic trend of slowing population growth. Africa seems to have been on a trajectory of curbing population growth for some time. Alarmist predictions of an exponential increase in Africa's population from the current 1.4 billion to 4 billion by 2100 are not supported by the statistical data available to the international scientific community (Terranova, 2024). Now even the Club of

Rome has revised its forecast, suggesting that the population bomb may never explode (The Economist, 2023). It is estimated that sub-Saharan Africa's population could peak as early as 2060, 40 years earlier than projected by the UN. Although African population growth is still high, Africa's fertility rate is falling faster than expected, mirroring a trend recently observed in East Asian countries due to social and economic development in recent years (**Fig.1**).



**Figure 1.** Total fertility rate by region, estimates and projections, 1950-2100. Source: UNDESA, 2022.

According to the United Nations, Nigeria's fertility rate has fallen from 5.8 five years ago to 4.6 in 2021. This trend is supported by another study commissioned by the US government's development agency, USAID, which found a fertility rate of 4.8 in 2021, down from 6.1 in 2010. If this demographic trend continues, Nigeria's population could peak at 342 million in 2060, 200 million less than the United Nations estimated a decade ago. A similar trend appears to be emerging in parts of the Sahel, which still has the highest fertility rates in Africa, and in coastal West Africa. In Mali, for example, the fertility rate has fallen from 6.3 to a still high 5.7 in six years. Senegal's rate will be 3.9 in 2021, one less child per woman than just over a decade ago. The same is true of the Gambia, where the rate will fall from 5.6 in 2013 to 4.4 in 2020, and Ghana, where it will fall from 4.2 to 3.8 in just three years. These declines will bring West Africa closer to the lowest fertility rates recorded in much of southern and eastern Africa. Not to mention the Maghreb countries, which have experienced the fastest fertility decline in Africa over the past 70 years, from an average of seven children per woman in 1950 to 2.5 children per woman today. (The Economist, 2023).

In addition to these somewhat surprising data on the slowdown in African population growth, it should be noted that a large proportion of African countries are underpopulated (Sale, 2020). Compared to other continents, Africa has a low population density spread over an area of 30 million square kilometers. Sub-Saharan Africa has an average of 48 people per square kilometer, lower than the United Kingdom (277), Japan (346), or South Korea (531). Of the five most populous countries in sub-Saharan Africa, all have a population density below that of the UK. There is little evidence that entire African countries are caught in a Malthusian trap, named after Thomas Malthus, who argued that population growth would outstrip food supply, leading to catastrophe. The global increase in food trade and production, coupled with a decrease in the amount of land required for production, means that neither subregions nor countries need to be selfsufficient as long as their economies generate the wealth needed to buy it. Compared to European population densities, Africa is virgin territory for many sectors of the international economy, especially agro-industry, with considerable availability of arable land (Giro, 2019). The low density of the African population has its roots, as anticipated in the first paragraph of this work, in the African slave trade, practised in various ways by European, but also Arab, powers in past centuries. The African continent was the only one, we repeat, where the population never increased during the long period between the beginning of the sixteenth century and the end of the nineteenth century.

#### 4. Conclusion

By the end of this century, for the first time since the Black Death in 1300, the world's population could be shrinking rather than growing. The cause will not be the number of deaths but the decline in births: from a baby boom to a baby bust (Dassù & Menotti, 2023; Terranova, 2023). World population growth has slowed down. At the same time, we still face global challenges from more localised demographic cluster bombs. Today's demographic problems are not about overpopulation in absolute terms, as Robert Malthus and his disciples argued, but about the distribution and composition of the population in global space. The big news from recent UN surveys is that the African continent is part of this international trend.

This unprecedented and for many unexpected slowdown in Africa's population growth could be a positive sign for the continent as a whole. The geography of population has domestic and international geopolitical consequences: on political, economic and social balances, on the weight and role of each state, on migration flows, on the sustainability of welfare and health systems, on relations between old and new generations, between emerging and dominant powers, between rural and urban areas, etc. (Terranova, 2023). Historically, in the absence of exceptional events such as wars, famines and pandemics, the demographic transition, and in particular the shift from high to low fertility, reflects a long process of adapting habits to the effects of economic and social growth, as the European case shows, where the decline in the birth rate was the result of social and economic changes. In fact, history shows that welfare and widespread prosperity are the most effective contraceptives for any developing population.

This implies that Africa is undergoing a process of social, political, and economic modernization, albeit a complex, slow, fragmented, and uneven one. Falling fertility rates are expected to increase both the share of the working-age population and the number of women in the labour force, supported by rising female school enrolment (Frigeri & Zuppi, 2018). For example, it is estimated that reducing Nigeria's fertility rate by one child per woman could almost double its per capita income by 2060 (Karra *et al.*, 2017). The slowdown in Africa's population growth has also been attributed to massive urbanisation, with millions of people moving from rural areas to urban centres, where the desire to start a family has traditionally been

constrained by growing individual and professional aspirations. Humanity is actively contributing to the construction of a better, freer world, providing enhanced opportunities for everyone, especially women. This noteworthy progress warrants widespread celebration and continuous commitment from all. However, this advancement also implies that individuals, particularly women, may find their desire to start a family in conflict with other significant aspirations, such as careers, projects, and relationships. As of now, no society has completely resolved this challenge (Spears, 2023).

For African countries to fully benefit from this evolving demographic scenario, those entering the labour market must have access to productive and well-paid employment. But this is a monumental challenge for a continent that needs trillions of dollars in infrastructure investment, including roads, power lines, airports and ports, to create such opportunities. Africa's core challenge is therefore not demographic, but economic, political and social. This encompasses both internal geopolitics (Lacoste, 2014) and international geopolitics.

Internally, Africa's economic development is hampered by a corrupt and fractious political class, often incapable of managing the region's natural resources and depriving young people of a sustainable future. In addition, the democratic deficit in many countries and the persistence of military-led governments or long-standing dictatorships do not bode well for the continent's immediate future. (Sale, 2020).

From an international geopolitical perspective, Africa's economic development is being influenced, if not hindered, by various global actors eager to exploit the continent's vast natural resources. Emerging powers such as Brazil, India, Russia and Turkey, but especially China, are gaining influence as former European colonial powers lose their grip on African territories.

In the space of a few years, China's presence in Africa has gone from being a marginal concern for geopolitical specialists to a central issue in the continent's international relations. This phenomenon, unprecedented in its current scale, has roots that go back centuries. The leaders in Beijing have managed to fulfil the dream of Yongle, the ruler of the Ming dynasty. Yongle sent Admiral Zheng He to Somalia in the early 1400s to expand the Celestial Empire's global sphere of influence. Admiral Zheng organised several expeditions to the Arabian Peninsula and the rest of Africa. However, his efforts were thwarted by the successors of Emperor Yongle, who considered these ventures too expensive and unhelpful to the Chinese cause (Beuret & Michel, 2008).

Returning to more recent times, another key moment in China's

economic and political penetration of Africa was the Bandung Conference in 1955, which marked the beginning of the so-called Third World movement. China played a major role in this movement. Chinese leader Zhou Enlai's trip to Africa in 1963-64 had one primary objective: to garner support for the revolutionary national liberation movements and nascent socialist governments emerging from decolonisation. The mission aimed to find allies in the Third World and break China's diplomatic isolation.

These alliances led many African governments to officially recognise the People's Republic of China in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, countries such as Togo, Benin, Sierra Leone and Mauritania can now proudly claim over 50 years of loyalty to Beijing and its *one country* policy, particularly in its rivalry with Taiwan. These partnerships have always included various forms of economic aid, including the construction of stadiums, presidential palaces, railways, highways, hospitals and scholarships for deserving students. (Bellucci, 2010).

After a slowdown in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with profound changes in Chinese domestic politics, official relations with Africa were revitalised in 2000. The first China-Africa Forum, held in Beijing and attended by representatives from 45 African states, symbolically marked the beginning of a new era. In a short space of time, Beijing successfully realised a project that, as we have argued, was rooted in the past. The declaration issued at the end of the forum introduced new ideological paradigms, whose only link with the Bandung years was opposition to Western values. The declaration claims that Africa's current lack of development is due to the heavy burden of foreign debt owed to former European colonial powers, which undermines the efforts of African countries and impoverishes their economies. A common history of victorious struggles for national liberation and a common present, with China as the largest and most powerful developing country and many developing countries in Africa, underpin the 10 points of the Declaration on China-Africa Relations in the Third Millennium. Among them, one stands out as the most important factor for China's success in Africa. In particular, reference is made to paragraph 4 of the aforementioned Declaration, in which Beijing recognises that the universality of human rights and fundamental freedoms must be respected, but, as it specifies, "by promoting and supporting diversity in the world...". And again: "every country has the right to choose, in the course of its development, its social system, development model and way of life according to its own national conditions. Countries with different social systems, levels of development, values and historical and cultural contexts have the right to choose their own approach and model for the promotion and protection of human rights. The politicisation of human rights and the

imposition of human rights conditions on economic aid must be vigorously opposed, as they are themselves a violation of human rights" (Forum China-Africa Cooperation, 2024). Unlike former European colonial powers, China offers African governments financial and economic cooperation without demanding any form of democratisation in return.

This explains China's growing influence in Africa, a phenomenon that has been interpreted in two opposed ways. The first perspective sees the Sino-African partnership as a new form of colonialism with potentially serious socio-economic consequences for the African continent. The second perspective, on the other hand, sees this new relationship as a unique and unprecedented opportunity for Africa to break out of its prolonged state of underdevelopment. Some have summed up the situation humorously: Africans have yet to understand whether the Chinese are making them lunch or eating them. (Beuret & Michel, 2008).

Because of this complex of geopolitical domestic and international factors, the near future of Africa's economic, political and social development process remains uncertain. However, as we have argued in this paper, the slowdown in Africa's population growth indicates, as the history of population geography shows, that Africa has embarked on its modernisation path. This is all the more important given the new geopolitical centrality of Africa and the Mediterranean as a result of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. A conflict that has forced Europe to reconfigure the geography of its gas and oil supplies, replacing its historic partnership with Russia in favour of other African and Middle Eastern states. In conclusion, the process of modernisation and development in 21st century Africa has begun, the more difficult it is to determine its timeframe and manner.

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Territories continue to transform due to endogenous and exogenous development drives. The thickening of logistics and transport networks, large commercial hubs, energy supply options, agricultural and industrial policies, tourism and migrations constitute then, individually and in a systemic sense, some of the lenses available to read the transformative dynamics of territories in the crucial current geopolitical context. In addition, the increasing reach of digital technologies in the spaces and practices of our daily lives, has changed the way we perceive and use the landscape. These transformations find a reified outcome in landscape transitions, becoming a foothold for a trans-scale geographical reflection. We therefore want to insert this volume on this horizon. In fact, we have wanted to stimulate the geographical community to try their hand at landscape analysis to identify, through methodological and/or applied research contributions, problems, practices and trajectories inherent in the transformative dynamics of territories, compressed between the urgency of development and the need to change the energy and consumption paradigm.

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