



Fertility Trends and Economic Implications in Uganda

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The Center of Faith, Family and Justice (CFFJ) is a Ugandan Christian Think Tank founded in 2021 to contribute to evidence-based policy, advocacy, and decision making. Our main focus is to investigate how the social, political and economic conditions of life affect faith, family and justice. We aspire to connect policymakers and citizens; and to build transformed, resilient, and integrated communities.

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Executive Summary

The issue of fertility has been subject to so much controversy for decades around the world. There is still so much pressure from international organizations and governments around the world to reduce the fertility rates of people in so many countries. It is now that countries with contracting population pyramids are panicking and finding ways to solve the problems their severely low fertility rates pose on their economies.

Luckily, Africa has not suffered this badly yet. It still maintains the majority of its traditional lifestyles. Big families in Uganda, like in Africa have long been a source of pride. With a fast-changing fertility rate, however, it is prudent to examine the economic implications of Uganda's changing population characteristics. Modernity continues to affect the Ugandan cultures and lifestyles, all with implications on productivity and economic profit. This policy brief recommends that Uganda concentrates on investing in and developing its human capital, a major resource for the country.

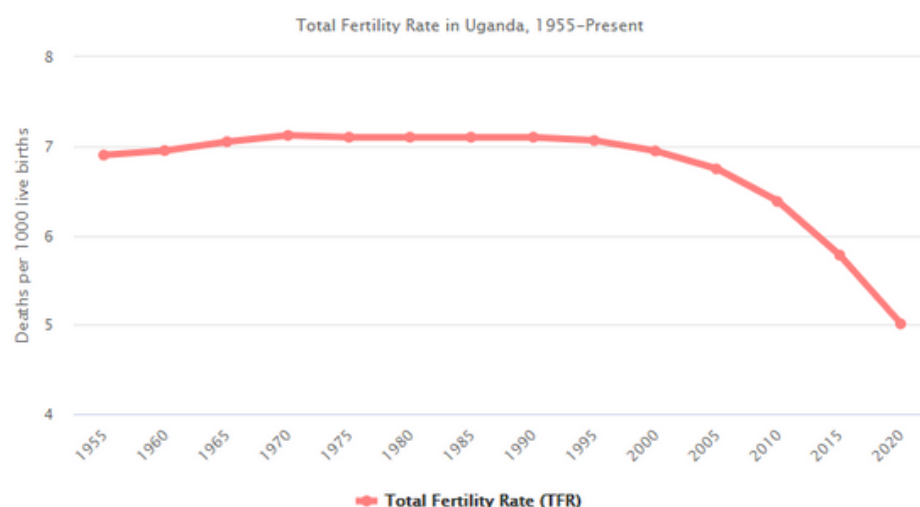
Fertility Rates in Uganda

Africans historically bore and raised large families. In addition to the very high fertility rates of African women, African men freely practised polygamy. This meant that African families were typically large, comprised of one husband, several wives and many children. The rural agrarian lifestyles Africans led through those centuries called for this kind of arrangement as children provided free labour meaning the more children a family had, the wealthier it could get.

With the dawn of education and modernity, Africans have been forced to transit from polygamous tendencies to monogamous tendencies. The introduction of contraceptives has also further drastically reduced the fertility rates of women reducing the size of the typical African family by far especially over the most recent decades. The persistently high birth rates prove this fact in African countries despite aggressive family planning campaigns through the decades (Lyman 2018). However, to date, Africa continues to face great pressure from international organizations to curb its fertility rates.

After maintaining a steady average fertility rate of 7 children per woman for over four decades, Uganda's fertility rate started dropping in the early 2000s. The average number of children a woman of childbearing age would have now in 2021 has dropped to less than 5 (World Bank 2020), double the global fertility rate (UN 2020). This fertility rate puts Uganda at the 8th highest fertility rate in the world (Population Pyramid, 2015).

Figure 1: Uganda's Total Fertility Rate 1955-present



Source: Worldometer, 2020

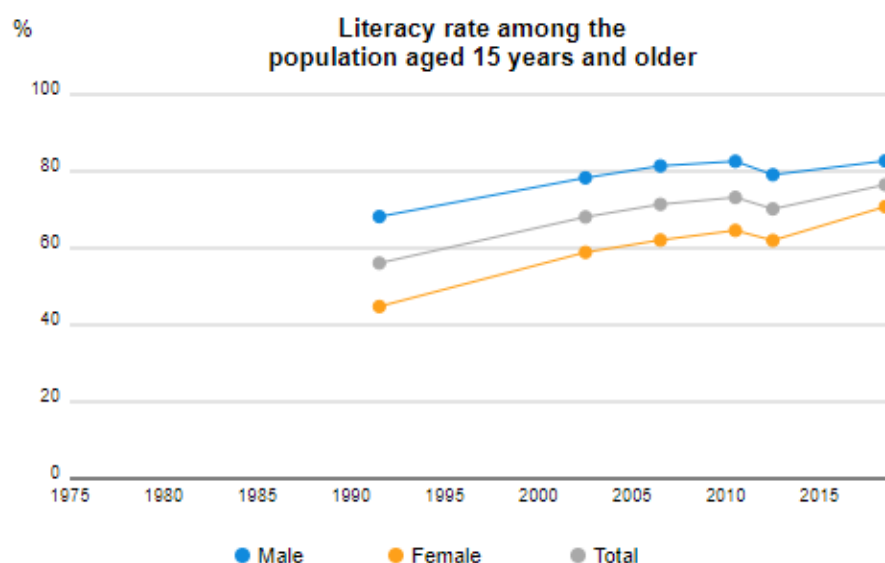
As is probably the case, the main reason for this may be that girls are now spending longer and longer in school in pursuit of a proper and full education. The increased literacy rates, especially for the girl child also means that girls are now more involved in the formal workforce, which reduces the time available and convenience of bearing many children. It is now easier to bear fewer children.

The rising trend of modernity and costs of living also means that women may choose to have fewer children in order to provide them with more. This growing ambition of young families means more and more now, families are prioritizing financial success. They all long to improve their standards of living. Financial success comes with minimizing costs, which may pose as children in this case. Bearing fewer children allows parents to provide the children with a better life.

With girls staying in school longer and longer to attain a fuller education, there has been a gradual reduction in teenage pregnancies and early marriages over the recent decades. Instead, the age at first marriage is growing higher.

The wide availability of contraceptives has also significantly made family planning easier for many women and men. It has played a highly significant role in reducing the fertility rate of women in Uganda.

Figure 2: Uganda's literacy rate among population aged 15 years and older (%)



Source: UNESCO, 2020

Greater access to information through cellphone and internet connectivity has also probably played its role in shaping youth perspectives regarding fertility. Education on reproductive health, contraception, and different cultures is now more readily available. Access to social media is increasingly changing youth perspectives. A greater sense of connectivity has probably allowed girls to be more ambitious, diverting their attention from procreation to setting and attaining goals for a more successful life.

Increased role-sharing in families. The Ugandan family system is slowly shifting from having a working-away-from-home father and stay-at-home mother, more like work-at-home-mother, to having both father and mother working away from home. More women are continuously entering Uganda's formal workplace, while even more women are heavily engaged in the informal work sector. With both parents away from home now, it is not as convenient to have so many children.

Times have changed. The livelihood styles have shifted from being agrarian-based to urban-employment-based. The formerly labor-intensive agrarian economy that benefited from free child labor has shifted to a skill-based economy that requires children to go to school and attain relevant skills for the workplace. Making children more of an economic cost now compared to when they were once an economic-benefit.

Despite the decline in fertility rate, because Uganda's population is predominantly youthful, the population has been growing steadily albeit at a lower rate.

With the gradually increasing exposure to social media, western views of life are slowly but steadily influencing many African cultures. It is becoming increasingly desirable for Africans to achieve their versions of the ‘American dream’- A good job, a beautiful house, two kids and a dog.

However, Africans still cherish the warmth of growing up in large families- commonly extended, and as a result, they enjoy an extensive support system throughout their lives. Historically, close-knit families and communities gave no chance to loneliness and depression. These have been foreign concepts to African societies until recently.

Economic Implications

One favourite implication that developed economies attribute to low fertility rates is economic development. It is well-known that many developed countries curbed fertility rates as a strategy to spur economic growth and development (higher GDP per capita). And as the developed world enjoys great economic success now, they face an increasingly contracting population, with more older adults than young ones.

Although Uganda’s economy has grown tremendously over the past two decades, the numbers reflect poorly because of the high population increase every year. Uganda’s population pyramid shows more babies, children and youth in the country than any other age group. Uganda’s growth pyramid is still expanding.

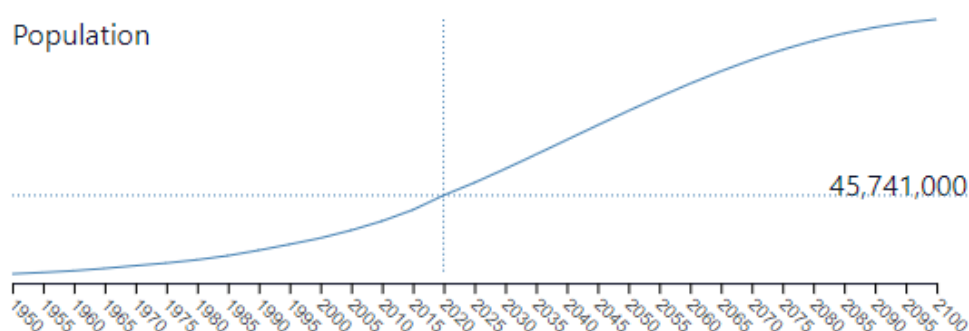
Therefore, despite the declining fertility rates, Uganda will continue enjoying population growth for several decades to come.

The population increase implies that if Uganda invested heavily in its human capital, it could reap high population dividends. Population dividends happen when the majority of the population is youthful, working and promoting growth in the economy. The Ugandan people could be Uganda’s greatest resource. A highly educated population would translate into a high-quality labour force that can translate into rapid economic growth and development.

A growing tax base is the first benefit that Uganda will continue enjoying until the population starts contracting-probably several decades from now.

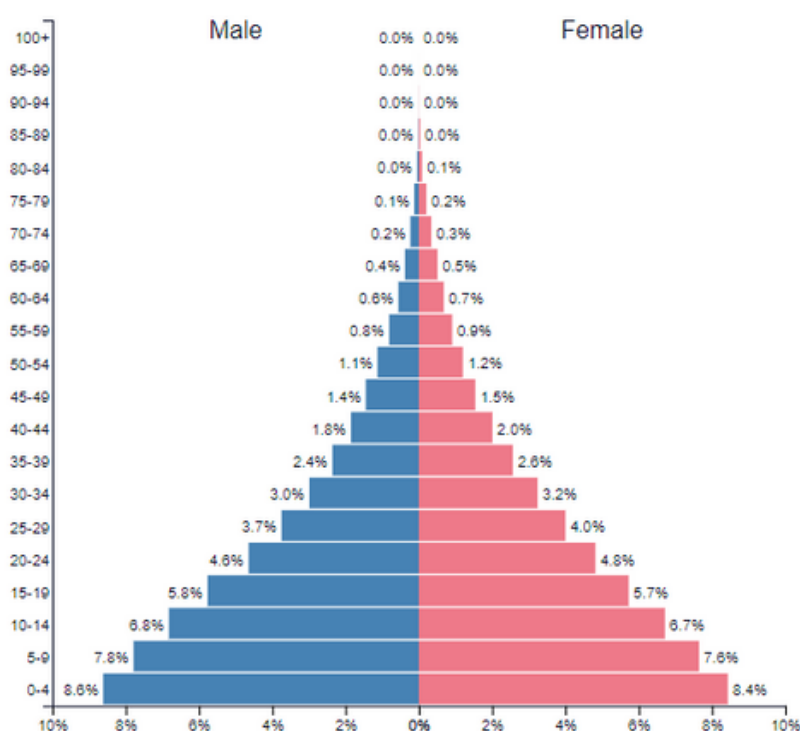
Comfortable living: Having fewer children means more resources can be saved at the family level allowing for a higher quality of education for the children and higher living standards for the family.

Figure 3: Uganda’s population growth trend



Source: Population Pyramids of the World

Figure 4: Uganda's population pyramid



Source: Population Pyramids of the World

Policy Recommendations

The dire need for institutional reformation remains a high priority for the government. Good institutions will strengthen the public and private sector systems, allowing Uganda to harness its human resources better. Our increasing population is a blessing that must be well managed as opposed to being resisted. Investing in the Ugandan people would reap Uganda enormous benefits.

Investing in good quality education is at the foundation of any human development policy. Private investors must be encouraged to invest in high-quality schools. The Government of Uganda (GoU) urgently needs to invest in its Human Capital. With Uganda's

Human Development Index is still very low, at 0.38 and with literacy levels still un-satisfactory, much more needs to be done to provide an enabling environment for youth to thrive adequately.

Uganda should find ways to deal with the appallingly high levels of youth unemployment. When the youth find work, Uganda's tax base will be significantly enriched. Encouraging and facilitating self-employment, promoting both local and international investments in the country.

Continuously supporting families to increase their income capacities. The Government of Uganda ran strong self-employment drives to support the informal sector of Uganda's workforce, the vast majority. Such initiatives and more which support the family are of great importance because the family is at the heart of society. When families thrive, communities thrive.

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