

October 2018

The Biggest Migration Challenge Ever

The following policy brief is based on the author's participation in [a panel debate](#) on "Migration, population growth and development cooperation".

Population in Africa increased almost six fold in the past seven decades, from 229 million in 1950 to 1.3 billion today, and it will continue to rise to around 4.5 billion in the year 2100, before stabilizing (Figure 1 - next page).

Africa's population structure will also change in this period: Africa will be the only region where the share of the working age population (aged 15-64) will increase, notably [from 56% today to 64% in 2100](#). Thus decline of the dependency ratio will not necessarily be a demographic gift. Whether it will spur development or not will depend on the ability of the economy to absorb and productively employ the extra workers.

If the labor supply cannot be absorbed locally, the push to migrate will increase. Besides, large numbers of unemployed youth also [increase the risk of political instability](#), which could further fuel migration. As Professor Nabli predicted at the panel discussion: Europe is at the eve of the biggest migration challenge it has ever faced.

Malthusian perspective

In the popular view, the prospect of a vast population explosion is almost always associated with doomsday scenarios, including poverty, famine and war. That Malthusian perspective can be overstated: the continuation of the demographic explosion *in itself* is unlikely to make Africa poorer or more violent.

Thomas Malthus wrote that "the power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race" ([Malthus, Essay on the principal of population, 1798, p. 44](#)). However, soon after the publication of his essay, the industrial revolution took off, bringing about continued productivity increases that allowed production growth to outpace population growth. In particular, [since 1800 world population increased sevenfold](#), but [production increased 73-fold](#), resulting in a more than tenfold increase of average per capita production.

That production outpaced population is not only true globally, but also for Africa. In the period 1800-2017, [Africa's population rose more than 12-fold](#), but [its production increased 55-fold](#). In the more recent period 1960-2016, when its population increased almost fivefold, [GDP in Africa increased](#)

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more than sevenfold. The share of its population living in extreme poverty also declined, from 69.1% to 44.5%. So overall, Sub-Saharan Africa has not suffered from a Malthusian catastrophe. However, did it experience local Malthusian catastrophes? After all, hunger and famine are still with us, as are violent conflicts.

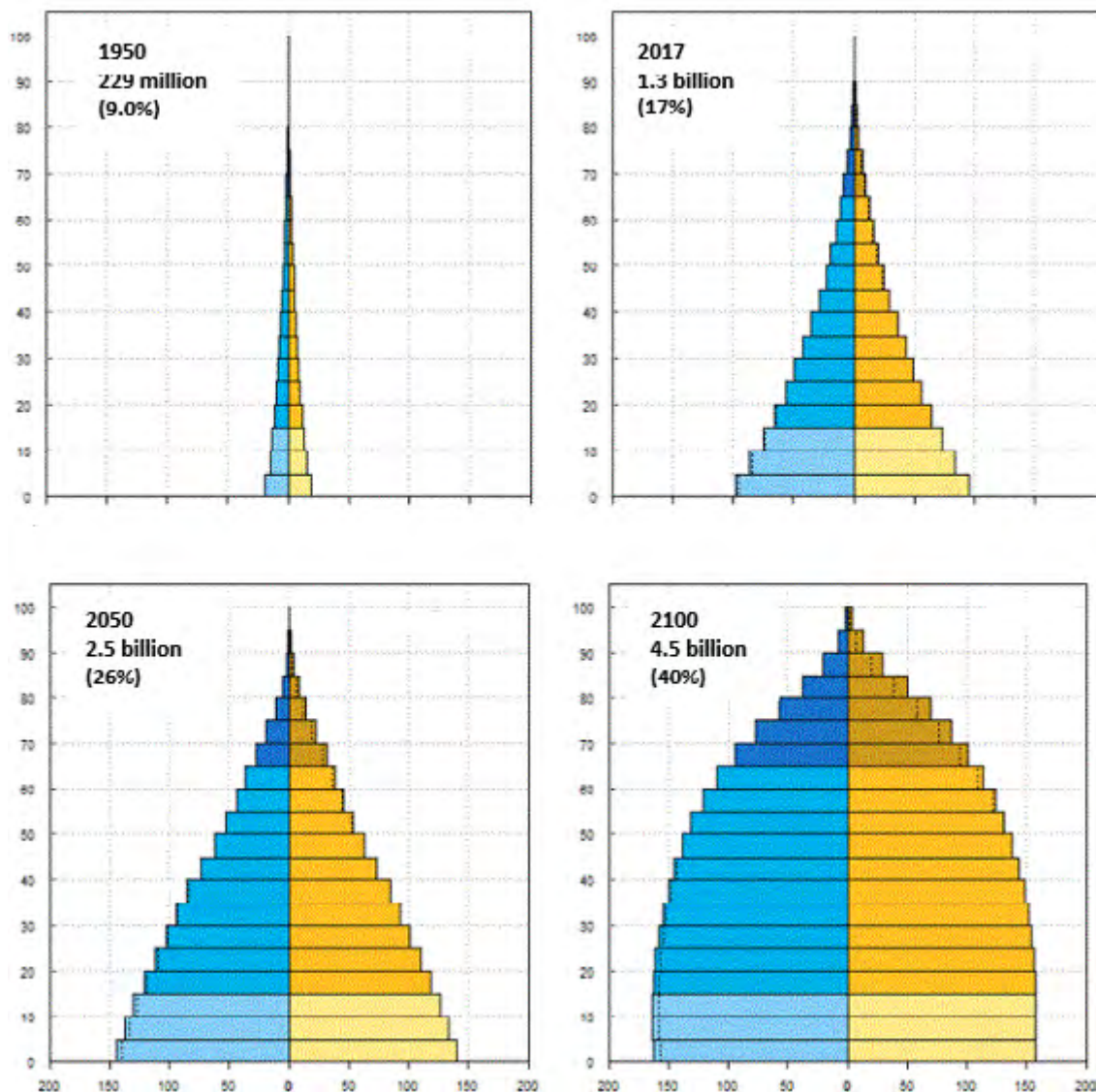


figure 1

Note: Author's compilation from data retrieved from United Nations, [World Population Prospects 2017](#). The vertical axis indicates age cohorts; the horizontal axis gives population in millions.

Land scarcity and the Rwandan genocide

On the eve of the genocide, Rwanda was Africa's most densely populated non-island nation. It has been demonstrated both in [quantitative](#) and [qualitative](#) work that land scarcity added to the intensity of the genocide. For instance, in one of my studies on Rwanda, "[Leave none to claim the land](#)", I demonstrate that in high density areas with many young single men, less Tutsi survived the genocide.

However, the estimated effects are relatively small¹, and even [scholars](#) who

¹ In "[Leave none to claim the land](#)", I estimate that an increase in pre-genocide population density by 100 inhabitants per km² resulted in a rise of the genocide's death toll by 1 to 2 percentage points, and that an increase in pre-genocide share of single men aged 25-35 by 10 percentage points led to a rise of the genocide's death toll by 2 to 3 percentage points.

argue that land scarcity played a role in the Rwandan genocide agree that it *did not cause the onset* of the genocidal campaign. Instead, [a combination of historical and macro-political factors](#) did.

Thus, in itself, the continuation of the demographic explosion is unlikely to make Africa poorer or more violent. Institutions are the key, both to stimulate an economic transformation and to preserve political stability.

Institutional perspective

The insight that institutions are key emerges from the body of research on the link between demography and conflict. The literature indeed documents correlations between the [youth bulge & political conflict](#), and between [land scarcity & conflict intensity](#). However, these correlations are conditional, in the sense that they only occur in the absence of institutions that spur agricultural innovation, that allow youth to express grievances in a non-violent way, that mitigate the sharpest (horizontal) inequalities, etcetera. This is not unlike the argument made by Amartya Sen that [famines do not have a natural cause](#), but an institutional one: hence, his claim that famines do not occur in functioning democracies.

Unfortunately, the democratic record in Africa is poor. Almost all of its nations are categorized as ‘not free’ or only ‘partly free’ by [Freedom House](#). On average, Africa also scores low on the [worldwide governance indicators](#), and has made little (if any) progress in the past decades.

At this point it is worthwhile coming back to the Rwandan case. Although [Rwanda qualifies as ‘not free’](#) scoring [very low on ‘voice and accountability’](#), it has made [tremendous progress on other good governance indicators](#), such as governance effectiveness, security, rule of law, and control of corruption.

Most likely, these improvements in governance partly account for the fact that [production growth in Rwanda has greatly outpaced population growth in the past 20 years, resulting in a doubling of GDP per capita since 2000](#). This does not mean that violence will no longer re-occur in Rwanda. There is [severe political and societal repression](#), and [power is concentrated in the hands of the Tutsi minority](#). And, as in the pre-genocide era, chains of accountability are [running upwards not downwards](#). However, the point here is that if violence breaks out again in Rwanda, it will not be because of land scarcity *per se*, but because of the absence of inclusive institutions.

Policy perspective

According to the institutional perspective, population explosion in Africa does not imply that the continent will be poor and violent. However, when it comes to migration, even if Africa grows prosperous and becomes peaceful, the pressure to migrate to Europe will increase.

Firstly because – regardless of the income levels and distribution – 3 billion people will be added to Africa’s population. Second, contrary to what is often thought, development does not reduce migration. In fact, it has been demonstrated that [the impact of income on migration is positive](#) until countries reach a level of around \$11000 per capita (PPP)². Prior to that

² The income threshold was measured by Clemens (2014) in 2005 PPP US\$ terms. The income distribution given in Figure 3 uses instead 2011 PPP US\$. For Africa, the income levels expressed in 2011 PPPUS\$ are about 60% higher than those measured in 2005 PPP US\$. This is why the threshold as mentioned in the article (6000-8000) is increased by 30%.

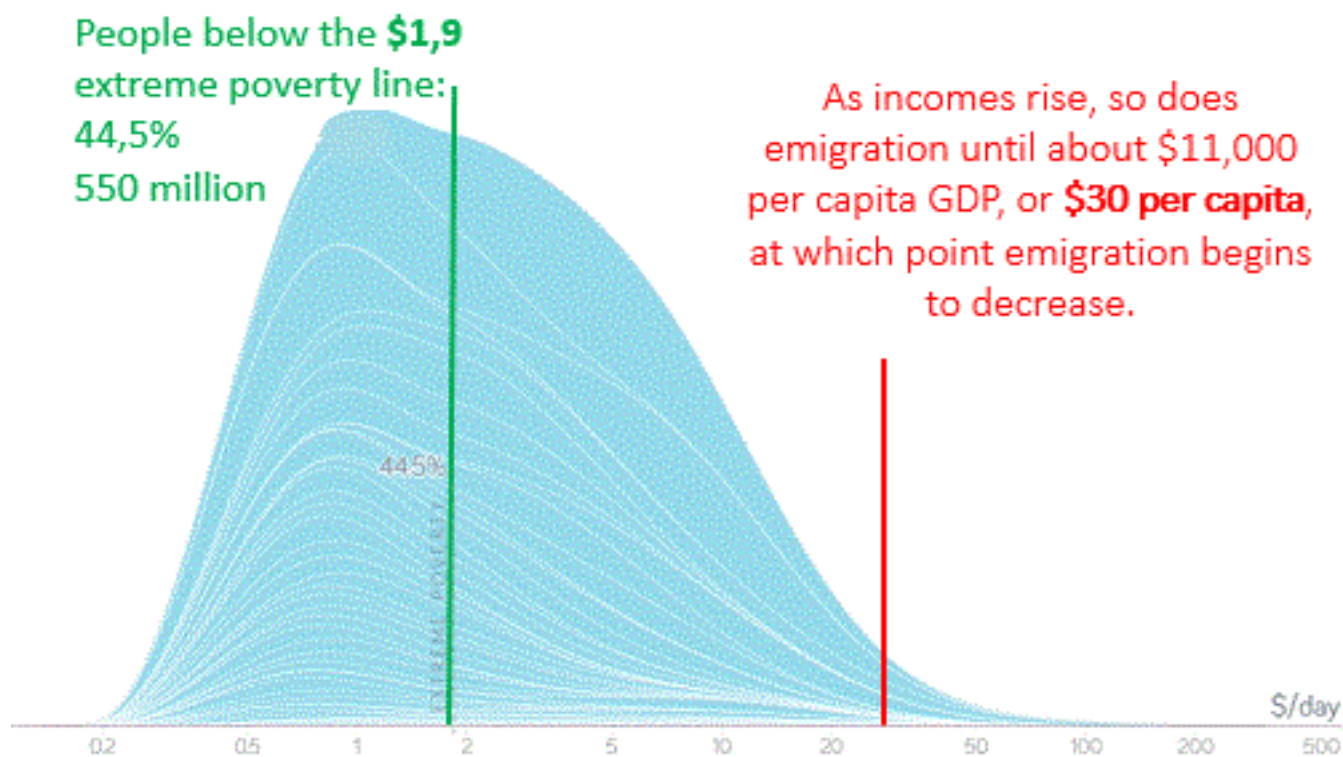


Figure 2. Distribution of Africa's income in 2015, with indication of poverty line and migration threshold

Notes: author's compilation based on Gapminder, Clemens (2014) and from WDI. The income threshold was measured by Clemens (2014) in 2005 PPP US\$ terms. The income distribution given in Figure 3 uses instead 2011 PPP US\$. For Africa, the income levels expressed in 2011 PPPUS\$ are about 60% higher than those measured in 2005 PPP US\$. This is why the threshold as mentioned in the article (6000-8000) is increased by 30%.

threshold, a rise in income expands the ability to migrate, mainly because greater access to networks and financing alleviates the most stringent constraints to migration.

The income distribution in Africa still is far below that threshold (Figure 2). For instance, to come back to Rwanda one last time: at the country's current income of 1900\$ per capita, and a per capita growth rate of income of 4 to 5 per cent, it would take over a generation (40 years) for the country to pass that threshold.

Regardless of whether Africa will be 'poor and violent' or 'prosperous and peaceful', we are at the eve of the biggest migration challenge Europe has ever faced. Our policymakers have to prepare for it, and deal with it, preferably in an organized rather than a chaotic way, in order to realize the [potential for a win-win](#). This potential is very real. After all, Europe's population will soon count many shades of grey, and adding youngsters to Europe's age pyramid can improve the quality of lives, both at the bottom and the top of the age pyramid.