



Sub-Saharan Africa faces a development challenge greater than any other region.

The present time is a moment of opportunity on the African continent. Africa is making new headway: democracy and economic reform are revitalizing the continent, and a number of countries are experiencing dynamic economic growth. With greater political openness, African governments are increasingly seeking to address the health and education needs of their people.

Despite these positive trends, sub-Saharan Africa faces a development challenge greater than any other region. Africa's progress has not reached enough people, and too much of the continent is still plagued by political instability. Many African nations are struggling to meet the health and education needs of populations expanding at about three percent a year. In too many countries, rapid population growth continues to threaten the natural resource base and future prospects for prosperity. The region's ability to slow current high rates of population growth is thus key to achieving its full potential for development.

The international community has good reason to care about African development. The continent is endowed with ample mineral and agricultural resources, including the greatest potential in the world for increases in farm productivity. Africa is also one of the last untapped markets for goods and services; industrialized countries thus stand to benefit by trading with a more prosperous Africa. Beyond economic self-interest, there are strong humanitarian reasons to support efforts to alleviate poverty in Africa, home to 11 percent of the world's population.

In many respects, Africa in the late 1990s resembles the East Asian economies as they began their economic take-off three decades ago. With hindsight, it is now clear that rapid declines in fertility played an important role in the "East Asian miracle." An important lesson from the success

of these Asian countries is the need to develop effective population policies and programs, while also building human capacity through investments in health and education. Currently, literacy levels in Africa are only half the levels prevailing in East Asia in the mid-1960s.

African governments need to emphasize three key strategies in their efforts to improve individual well-being and slow population growth. The first priority should be to expand reproductive health and family planning services to meet existing unmet needs. The second, to expand educational and economic opportunities, especially for women, both to improve the lives of individuals and to help encourage a desire for smaller families. The third, to slow the momentum of future population growth through education and reproductive health programs that help young people choose to delay child-bearing.

Carrying out the comprehensive agenda described above will require enormous effort by African governments. The task is large, yet attainable if these governments increase their current low levels of commitment to reproductive health and family planning programs. In Bangladesh, sustained political support has been key to the development of a strong family planning program, and has helped bring about dramatic declines in fertility even in a desperately poor country where most women are still illiterate.

The international community, meanwhile, needs to recognize the importance of investments in health and education to future stability and growth, and the continued need for donor support until countries can fully finance these services themselves. The United States, in particular, must not retreat further from the strong leadership it has provided in both funding and hands-on technical advice to reproductive health and family

planning programs in the region. Given its unique ability to help move population programs ahead, the United States should explore ways to continue such assistance to those African countries in which it no longer maintains a bilateral assistance program or field presence. In addition, other donors need to expand their efforts.

Governments and donors should be prepared to invest years of sustained effort to build successful population programs. Over the long haul, there are bound to be setbacks and difficulties. Currently, there is no reason to expect that either the fertility or development transitions will occur more quickly and with less external aid in sub-Saharan Africa than they did in places such as South Korea and Taiwan.

Yet the needs are pressing, and Africa must accelerate the development of population programs and the current trend towards smaller families. This may be possible if African countries are willing to learn as much as possible from the experiences of other regions, while at the same time recognizing the continent's own special challenges, such as the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Africa's relatively recent establishment of population policies and programs has given it the chance to learn from both the mistakes and achievements of other regions which have grappled with the problem of rapid population growth. African countries – with help from the world community – have the potential to build on these experiences and create their own success story.

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