

Population aging in sub-Saharan Africa: Present and prospects

P. Sadasivan Nair PhD^a

^aDepartment of Population Studies, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana; E: nairps@mopipi.ub.bw

P.S. Nair. Population aging in sub-Saharan Africa: Present and prospects. Gerontechnology 2014;13(1):11-15; doi:10.4017/gt.2014.13.1.009.00 A total of 44 countries is considered here for the analysis. Overall, the level of population aging in 2012 is low in sub-Saharan Africa, around 5%. More than one third (38.6%) of the countries show more than 100% increase in the proportion of 60+ population by 2050. About 28% of the countries have a growth rate of 50% or less. The regional variations within sub-Saharan Africa show that the eastern and southern regions have more growth potential as far as population aging is concerned. No doubt, in sub-Saharan Africa, poverty among older persons is higher than that of the rest of the population. However, 55% of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa have a real GDP growth of more than 5%. Further, a large number of sub-Saharan countries are projected to experience high and increasing economic support ratios for years or decades to come, and can therefore benefit significantly from the 'demographic dividend' brought in by the ongoing age structural transition. Thus, with higher GDP growth levels and hence reduction in poverty, higher educational levels and changing life styles including independent living, we can reasonably expect increased scope for the utilization of gerontechnology in the coming decades, at least in a limited way.

Keywords: aging, age structural transition, demographic dividend, poverty

Population aging, the most notable demographic phenomenon in the new millennium, results from the age structural transition underway globally. This process is an offshoot of the so-called demographic transition through decreasing mortality, and, most importantly, declining fertility and it leads to a relative reduction in the proportion of children and to an increase in the share of people in the main working ages and of older persons in the population. The global share of older people (aged 60+) has increased from 9.2% in 1990 to 11.7% in 2013 and will continue to grow as a proportion of the world population reaching 21.1% by 2050¹. Globally, the number of older persons (aged 60+) is expected to more than double, from 841 million people in 2013 to more than 2 billion in 2050. Older persons are projected to exceed the number of children for the first time in 2047². At present, 64% of older persons reside in developing countries; the percentage is projected to increase to 80 % by 2050¹.

In most sub-Saharan African countries, the number of older people is growing. In 2005, there were 34 million people age 60 and over, and this number is projected to increase to over 67 million by 2030. In fact, the number of older people is growing more rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa than in the developed world. This increase in the number of older people will occur despite the excess mortality due to AIDS that many countries in the region are currently experiencing. In comparison, the older population of Europe is

projected to increase from 20.7% to 34.5% over the same period³.

With this scenario, the aim of this paper is to portray the current levels and future prospects of population aging in sub-Saharan countries by region. Further, the scope for gerontechnological development in the region is also explored. For the analysis, sub-Saharan Africa is divided into four regions; Eastern, Middle, Southern and Western.

GROWTH OF THE POPULATION 60+

Figure 1 depicts the trends in the average annual growth rates of 60+ population in sub-Saharan Africa in comparison with more developed countries for the period from 2000 to 2050.

The growth rate of the 60+ population is high in sub-Saharan Africa in comparison with more developed countries and is increasing fast (*Figure 1*). The annual growth rate is likely to reach around 3.7% in 2050. During the same period the growth rate in developed countries is likely to reduce to 0.3%.

How about the numbers of aged people in sub-Saharan Africa? In 2005, Nigeria ranked among the top 30 countries in the world on the basis of the size of its population aged 60 and over. Nigeria had the largest older population in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than 6 million people aged 60 and over; South Africa had just over

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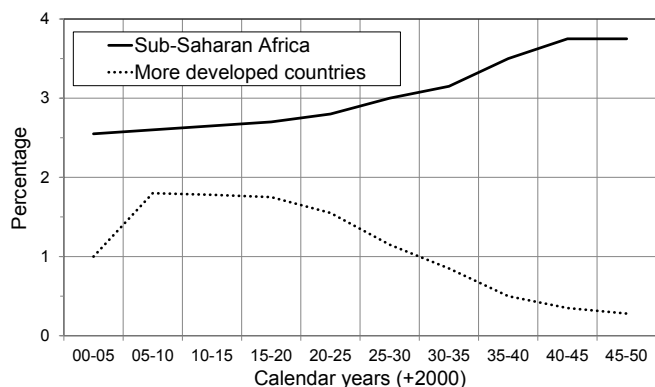


Figure 1. Average annual growth rates of the age 60 and over population in sub-Saharan Africa versus more developed countries: 2000 to 2050; Redrawn after US Census Bureau³

3.4 million. Six additional sub-Saharan African countries had more than 1 million people aged 60 and over in 2005 (Figure 2).

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

A total of 44 countries is considered here for the analysis. Mauritius, with a proportion of aged at 9%, is excluded from the analysis due to its geographic location outside the mainland. As mentioned earlier, the level of population aging in 2012 is low in sub-Saharan Africa, around 5% only. It varies from 3% in Mali to 8% in South Africa. A large majority (70.5%) of countries have the proportion 5% or below. Slightly above one third (36.4%) of the countries has exactly 5% of their population above 60 years. Botswana in the South and Gabon in the Western region have around 7% of the population above 60 years (Table 1).

Let us examine the speed of aging or the prospects by the middle of the century (Table 1). More than one third (38.6%) of the countries show more than 100% increase in the proportion of 60+ population by 2050. About 28% of the countries have a growth rate of 50% or less. In these countries, the level of fertility is still comparatively high while the pace of mortality decline is high. It is encouraging to see the emergence of the so-called 'demographic dividend' in at least 50% of sub-Saharan countries. The ques-

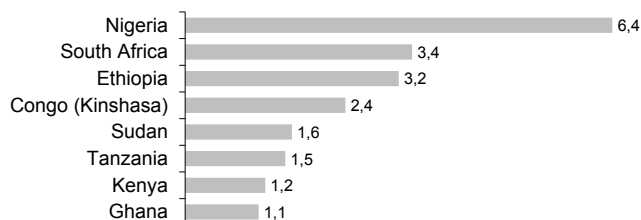


Figure 2. Selected sub-Saharan countries with large older populations (in millions) in 2005; Redrawn after US Census Bureau³

tion is whether these nations have the political wisdom and economic resources to exploit the window of opportunity thrown upon to them for socio-economic transition. Further, most of the countries have lower sex ratios implying lower survival probability for men in older ages. This phenomenon is not strange because of the higher life expectancy for females. However, this is exacerbated in the sub-Saharan situation due to the higher prevalence rate and mortality due to HIV/AIDS among men.

Eastern Africa

In Eastern Africa, the current level of aging ranges from 4% to 6% in sub-Saharan Africa. Fifty seven percent of these countries have the potential to more than double this level by 2050. However, it may be noted that in two countries, Zambia and Malawi, the data appear suspect (Table 1).

It may be noted that the sex ratio is favorable for women in all these countries. Further, the economic growth potential is quite high in this region. Nine countries (more than 50%) have an annual GDP growth of 5% or more.

The Middle region

In this region, the current levels of aging are below the average of the whole region. They range from 4% to 7%. The growth potential is not so high; only one country, Angola, exhibits the prospect of doubling the aged population by 2050 (Table 1).

Except Equatorial Guinea, all other countries have sex ratios less than 100 implying more females among the aged. Four countries (50%) have registered a GDP growth of more than 5%. It is strange to note that two countries, Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea have negative growth rates.

The Southern region

So far as aging is concerned, southern sub-Saharan Africa appears better off. Two countries which have higher levels of aging currently, South Africa and Botswana, are in this region. However, the growth potential is not large enough in this region. Only one country, Namibia, has the potential to go beyond 100% (Table 1).

This region looks rather strange: although more developed socio-economically, its economic growth po-

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tential is below the average of all of sub-Saharan Africa. Also, the sex ratios imply a much lower percentage of men in old ages. A seemingly plausible explanation for this is the higher prevalence of HIV/AIDS in this region.

The Western region

The western part appears an average region in terms of aging currently. Out of the countries in the region, half of them have the potential to grow fast and doubling the aged population by 2050. In Niger and Guinea-Bissau, the prospect of aging is very low, around 3% only (Table 1).

Except two countries, Côte d'Ivoire and Gambia, the whole region has lower sex ratios. Again, it is encouraging to note that the GDP growth potential is quite high in this region.

GERONTECHNOLOGY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

As we know, gerontechnology has been developed in the more developed countries. The reason for this is, obviously, the economic development and consequent higher purchasing power of people, especially the aged. In order to put this in proper perspective in sub-Saharan Africa, let us turn to the economic growth prospects in sub-Saharan Africa. Of course, economic growth in general will percolate to the old segment of population only gradually.

In a number of developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, poverty is high among older persons, higher than that of the population as a whole, especially in countries with limited coverage of social security systems. However, 55% of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa have a real GDP growth of more than 5%. Further, a large number of sub-Saharan countries are projected to experience high and increasing economic support ratios for years or decades to come, and can therefore benefit significantly from the 'demographic dividend' brought in by the ongoing age structural transition, provided that appropriate labour market and other policies allow for a productive absorption of the growing working-age

Table 1. Aging and development in sub-Saharan Africa

Country	60+ population, %			Sex ratio	GDP growth %
	2012	2050	Change		
Eastern Africa					
Burundi	5	12	140	69	4.5
Comoros	4	9	125	86	3.5
Djibouti	6	12	100	84	5.0
Eritrea	4	10	150	64	7.0
Ethiopia	5	12	140	87	7.0
Kenya	4	9	125	84	5.1
Madagascar	5	9	80	90	2.6
Malawi	5	5	0.0	83	5.0
Mozambique	5	7	40	77	7.0
Rwanda	4	9	125	84	7.5
Somalia	4	6	50	85	2.6
Uganda	4	6	50	82	5.6
Zambia	5	4	-20	81	6.0
Zimbabwe	6	12	100	75	3.2
Middle Africa					
Angola	4	8	100	83	5.6
Cameroon	5	9	80	85	4.6
Central African Republic	6	10	67	80	-15.4
Chad	5	7	40	84	3.9
Congo	6	9	50	86	5.8
Dem. Republic of the Congo	4	7	75	81	6.2
Equatorial Guinea	5	9	80	111	-1.5
Gabon	7	13	86	92	6.6
Southern Africa					
Botswana	7	13	86	78	3.9
Lesotho	6	9	50.	67	4.1
Namibia	6	13	117	76	4.4
South Africa	8	15	88	68	2.0
Swaziland	5	8	60	76	0.0
Western Africa					
Benin	5	8	60	71	5.0
Burkina Faso	4	7	75	68	6.5
Côte d'Ivoire	6	10	67	117	8.0
Gambia	4	8	100	110	6.4
Ghana	6	12	100	94	7.9
Guinea	5	8	60	86	2.9
Guinea-Bissau	6	8	33	86	0.3
Liberia	4	8	100	82	8.1
Mali	3	6	100	70	4.8
Mauritania	5	10	100	76	6.4
Niger	4	5	25	94	6.2
Nigeria	5	7	40	89	6.2
Senegal	4	8	100	87	4.0
Sierra Leone	4	7	75	97	13.3
Togo	5	12	140	85	5.5

population and for increased investments in the human capital of children and youth¹. Countries like Botswana and South Africa are favourably placed in this respect^{4,5}.

For example, in Botswana, the proportion of economically active population now is more than half of the population – 58.4% which is likely to increase to 70.1% in 2050. Again, the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa affects the intergenerational transfer payments substantially and hence forms a threat to the care of the aged.

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Along with this, if we assume that the GDP growth will also sustain or increase in the future and hence also a reduction in poverty, this is an indication of the increased scope for gerontechnology in the coming decades, at least in a limited way. The increase in the educational level is also a necessary ingredient for this⁶. The current literacy levels are not so encouraging. However, the growth potential in educational levels is quite high since more and more countries are now politically stable and the economic growth process is at enhanced levels.

The regional variations in GDP growth within sub-Saharan Africa show that the Western and Southern regions have better prospects for economic development in the near future. It may be noted that in the Southern region, the GDP growth rate is less than 5% level, perhaps due to the fact that the current growth levels are on a higher plateau already in this region. The Middle region is comparatively backward in this respect. The Eastern region is placed in the middle.

The older population is predominantly female and sub-Saharan Africa is no exception. In 2013, globally, there were 85 men per 100 women in the age group 60 years or over and 61 men per 100 women in the age group 80 years or over¹. These sex ratios are expected to increase moderately during the next several decades, reflecting a slightly faster projected improvement in old-age mortality among males than among females.

Many older persons still need to work, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2010, the labour force participation of persons aged 65 years or over was around 31% in less developed regions and 8% in more developed regions⁷. In both development groups, despite their numerical disadvantage, men made up a large majority of the total labour force among older persons.

Independent living is far more common in the developed countries, where about three quarters of older persons live independently, compared with only a quarter in developing countries and one eighth in the least developed countries. As countries develop and their populations continue to age, living alone or with a spouse only will likely become much more common among older people in the future, even in sub-Saharan Africa. This phenomenon also augurs well for the absorption of gerontechnology at least in a modest way in this region in the coming decades.

A survey of the current level of the use of gerontechnology shows that it is extremely low in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the mobile phone plays an important role among today's elderly in

most of the sub-Saharan countries. Many underprivileged with little resources share a mobile phone to get access to it, and many are open to new technologies⁸.

The mobile phone can be an important weapon to preventive health care and treatment of disease, especially in the war against HIV and AIDS in Africa. Furthermore, the use of wheelchairs and walking sticks is reported in most of the countries currently and they are on the increase. Also, the use of internet among elderly is slowly catching up in many countries such as South Africa and Botswana.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In most sub-Saharan African countries, the number of older people is growing. In 2005, there were 34 million people age 60 and over, and this number is projected to increase to over 67 million by 2030. In fact, the number of older people is growing more rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa than in the developed countries.

A total of 44 countries is considered here for analysis. Overall, the level of population aging in 2012 is low in sub-Saharan Africa, around 5%. It varies from 3% in Mali to 8% in South Africa. Botswana in the South and Gabon in the Western region have around 7% of their population above 60 years. In South Africa, this is 8%. More than one third (38.6%) of the countries show more than 100% increase in the proportion of 60+ population by 2050. About 28% of the countries have a growth rate of 50% or less. The regional variations within sub-Saharan Africa show that the Eastern and Southern regions have more growth potential as far as population aging is concerned.

Where does sub-Saharan Africa stand in terms of the utilization of gerontechnology? No doubt, in sub-Saharan Africa, poverty among older persons is higher than that of the rest of the population. However, 55% of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa have a real GDP growth of more than 5%. Further, a large number of sub-Saharan countries are projected to experience high and increasing economic support ratios for years or decades to come, and can therefore benefit significantly from the 'demographic dividend' brought in by the ongoing age structural transition⁹.

The older population is predominantly female and sub-Saharan Africa is no exception. However, this sex ratio is expected to increase moderately during the next several decades reflecting a slightly faster growth for males than females. Many older persons still need to work, especially

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in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2010, men made up of a large majority of the total labour force among older persons.

Furthermore, independent living, i.e. living alone or with a spouse only, will likely become much more common among older people in the future even in sub-Saharan Africa. This phenomenon also augurs well for the absorption of gerontechnology in this region in the coming decades.

Cell phones, walking sticks and wheelchairs are used increasingly in the region. Also, the use of internet among elderly is slowly catching up in many countries such as South Africa and Botswana.

Thus, with higher GDP growth levels and hence reduction in poverty, higher educational levels and changing life styles including independent living, we can reasonably expect an increased scope for the utilization of gerontechnology in the coming decades, at least in a limited way.

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