Africa in 2050: young & optimistic … with a caveat
By Leila Gharagozloo-Pakkala & Manuel Fontaine

Africa, already the world’s second most populous continent with more than 1 billion people, is experiencing a demographic shift unprecedented in its scale and swiftness, according to Generation 2030 Africa, a new report released by UNICEF on the continent’s child demographics.

Consider this: on current trends, in the next 35 years, 1.8 billion babies will be born in Africa; the continent’s under-18 population will increase by two thirds to reach almost 1 billion; and Africa’s overall population will double in size, reaching 2.4 billion. By 2050, Africa is projected to be home to one in every four of the world’s inhabitants, and almost 40 per cent of its children under 18 years.

The continent’s demographic surge is overwhelmingly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, and fuelled by high fertility and declining mortality. Although falling, fertility rates remain high: on average, each African woman of reproductive age (15-49 years) will have 4.5 children in 2015 – far above the global average of 2.5. The fertility rate for Africa’s adolescent girls is double the global average. Although Africa currently accounts for more than half of the global total of under-five deaths and faces the challenge of accelerating progress in saving children’s lives, it has made notable progress in reducing child deaths since 1990, and particularly since 2000 and in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Africa’s burgeoning population presents an unprecedented opportunity and several challenges. The opportunity lies in the potential for a so-called demographic dividend of sustained rapid economic growth in the coming decades.

As its fertility rate declines, Africa’s working-age population will expand more rapidly than the child and elderly populations combined, producing more potential workers per dependent. If this expanded workforce can be productively employed, the potential for increased production and savings is vast, and could sustain a prolonged economic boom that could contribute to drastically reduce poverty in Africa – where currently 70 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa’s people live on less than US$ 2/day.

But Africa’s demographic dividend is far from guaranteed by its changing demographics alone; reaping it will require the right pre-conditions. If the young children of today – who will be entering the labor force in just a decade and a half’s time – are skilled, dynamic and entrepreneurial, and can be productively and fully employed, Africa will reap the reward.

The opposite is also true. Without the right pre-conditions, Africa’s demographic boom could turn into a demographic burden, with mass deprivation, scarcity, unemployment and low productivity, with attendant negative implications for the continent’s stability and security.

Investment in children is Africa’s best hope to set the right pre-conditions for this potentially massive and transformative demographic dividend. Investing in early childhood development will be paramount; science underscores the criticality of a child’s earliest years to better health, educational attainment and productivity in adulthood.
Basic healthcare is vital to ward against infectious diseases in early childhood and ensure survival. The youngest children typically make 700 neural connections per second, and require stimulus and nurturing. Adequate nutrition is therefore vital.

The continent’s children will also require a firm foundation of quality learning that results in educational attainment that is both relevant to their lives, and equips them with the skills needed for the labor market of 21st century Africa. Protection from violence, conflict, abuse and exploitation are imperative if children are to reach their full potential. Inclusion of the marginalized and disadvantaged in essential services and protection through equity-focused programmes and policies will expand Africa’s potential to grow, save and invest. And fostering Africa’s children’s knowledge of human rights and sense of citizenship will help reduce the risk of future conflict, strife and discrimination.

Particular attention must be given to investing in and empowering Africa’s girls and young women. This is required to slow adolescent fertility rates, manage the demographic transition, and build a truly inclusive Africa. Prioritizing girls education, expanding access to culturally sensitive reproductive health services, and addressing the cultural, social and economic barriers that perpetuate the disempowerment of women are imperative for Africa to reap the full rewards of prosperity that a demographic dividend can bring.

Even with these investments, important challenges will remain. Many of Africa’s 54 countries are marked by fragile and conflict-affected contexts, extreme poverty and widespread inequity. Priority attention must be given to resolving these issues even as the continent grows apace. Resource-rich countries face the challenge of adopting policies to ensure that the poor and disadvantaged also benefit from extractive-led growth.

A new discourse is emerging on how to take advantages of Africa’s opportunities and tackle its challenges. The recent US-Africa leaders summit, and previous summits between Africa and China, Japan, and the EU, to name but three, underscore that Africa is being increasingly viewed as an emerging power on the global stage. Investing in its children, and placing them at the heart of its development agenda is Africa’s best opportunity to consolidate the social and economic gains of recent years, and maximize its demographic dividend in the 21st century.

Leila Gharagozlo-Pakkala is UNICEF’s Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa. Manuel Fontaine is UNICEF’s Regional Director for West and Central Africa.