



Relevance of Africa's older population to youth-oriented development for the continent

A case for integrating Africa's aging and demographic dividend agendas

Background

The African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), in partnership with the African Union Commission and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, convened the Aging and Demographic Dividend in Africa (ADDA) working group in 2013 to explore where connections could be made between Africa's youth-oriented development agenda and its growing older population:

The perspectives yielded by the working group have, over time, been further developed by APHRC into an evidence-informed argument on the importance of investing in Africa's present generation of older adults as part of strategies to reap a demographic dividend - a period of accelerated economic growth - on the continent.

This briefing note outlines the argument in three parts.

- 1 The present framing of, and lack of connections between, Africa's 'aging' and 'demographic dividend' agendas
- 2 The needed shift in conceptions of older age and older people that must inform any effort to explore the potential connections between the two agendas
- 3 Connecting the dots: pathways through which Africa's older populations might be harnessed in the quest to reap a demographic dividend

‘Youth-driven demographic dividend’ and ‘aging’: parallel agendas

In societies where birth rates remain high, swift and substantial fertility declines lead to a period when the working age population significantly outnumbers that of children and older adults: two age cohorts typically assumed to be dependent, with higher needs and lower outputs compared to productive adults.

A first demographic dividend (DD) may be triggered when the right ratio of ‘dependent’ to ‘productive’ age groups is achieved, and when the right conditions are in place. These conditions are: a population of young people with quality human capital – relevant knowledge, aptitudes and good health; and with adequate and sufficiently gainful employment and business opportunities; as well as stability and sound regulatory regimes to ensure a favorable climate for productive investments (FIGURE 1). A second dividend may follow, decades later, if workers as they reach their own older age remain financially independent by drawing on their savings, assets or continued labor income.

The African Union launched its continent-wide initiative in 2017 to encourage priority investments in youth in order to establish the enabling conditions for a first DD. The AU roadmap identifies four central ‘pillars’ that must be built through such investments, and

points to specific actions or ‘building blocks’ needed to this end (FIGURE 2). The actions are to be truly broad-based -- reaching the most underserved groups, at the bottom of the pyramid.

Africa’s parallel agenda on ‘aging’ is concerned with the other end of the age spectrum: the continent’s already large population of adults aged 60 years and above. Their number is expected to rise more rapidly than in any other region -- from 64 million today to some 226-million by 2050.

Captured in regional instruments such as the AU Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing, or the Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons, the agenda considers both the vulnerabilities and needs and the positive contributions of older people, and the imperative of realizing their rights to health, security, participation and non-discrimination.

So far, however, Africa’s present older population has received no consideration at all in strategic discussions on how countries might best shape investments in youth across the four demographic dividend pillars.

FIGURE 1

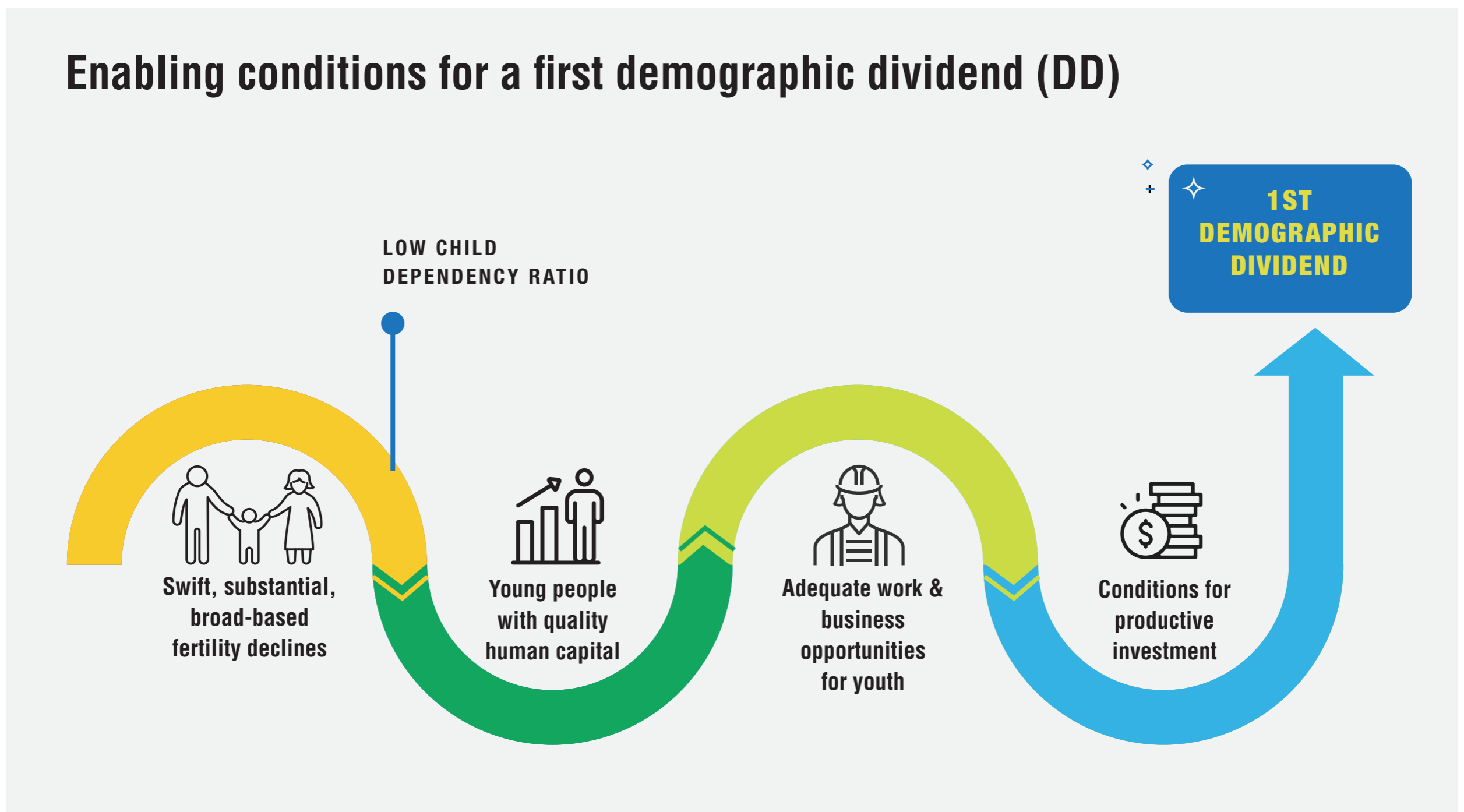
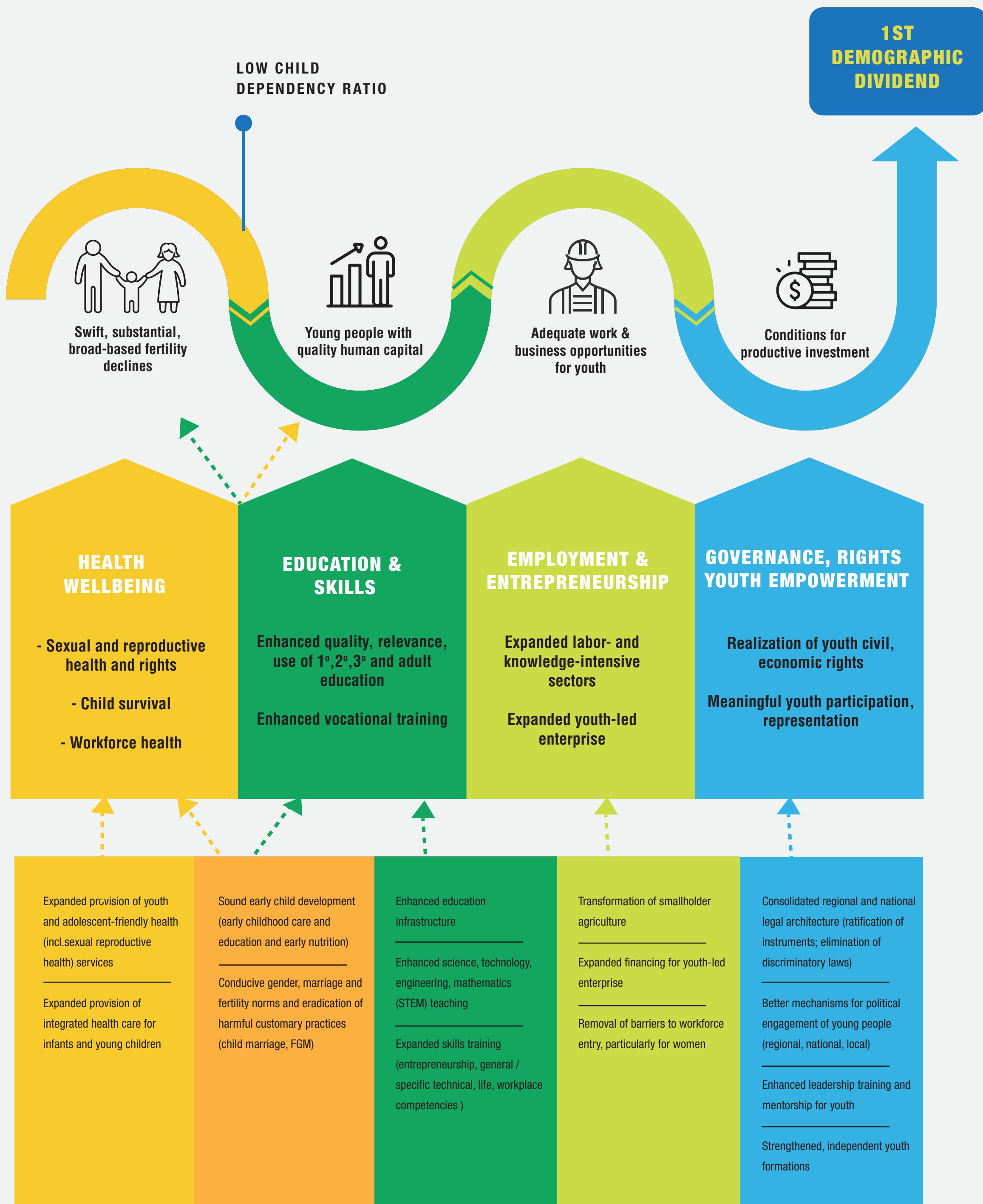


FIGURE 2

Pillars and building blocks to establish the conditions for a first DD



Shifting conceptions of older age

Entrenched assumptions about the essential nature of older age are a major reason for this gap. This is baldly illustrated in the concept of a 'dependency ratio', which lies at the heart of the demographic dividend idea and which constructs older people as 'no longer productive' and irrelevant. Later life is taken as a period of broad, inexorable decline – with older people presumed sick, frail, needy and unable to learn new things. The reality in sub-Saharan Africa is very different. Appreciating it requires shifts in present ideas about older age.

A first such shift requires a recognition of the diversity in Africa's older population: there is no one true archetype of an older African, and the variability and inequalities within this demographic group are huge. Some are captains of industry, or leaders in their profession; others merely scrape by, illiterate and innumerate. Some are in robust health, while others are beset by chronic illness with inadequate care to treat them. Some have the means to leave a substantive material legacy to their families, and others die as they lived, in abject poverty.

A second shift entails a realization that levels of physical or mental functioning or social engagement in later life are not cast in stone but are modifiable, able to be enhanced where appropriate interventions, environments and structures are in place.

A third shift acknowledges that 'formal retirement' -- a statutory ceasing of economic activity at a standard age -- has little relevance where a vast majority of workers operate in the informal sector.

A fourth shift appreciates that a focus on market productivity alone omits critical non-market contributions that individuals can make to overall productivity and progress – for example the value they add to building human capital or enabling economic activity through unpaid care or domestic work or other social functions.

A final, necessary, shift in ideas about older age accepts that just as deficit models of older age are flawed, so are narratives that focus exclusively on older African's positive contributions, implying that with age inevitably come wisdom, beneficence and commensurate actions. There are legions of examples of the limitations of this thinking.

Connecting the dots: relevance of older people for building the demographic dividend pillars

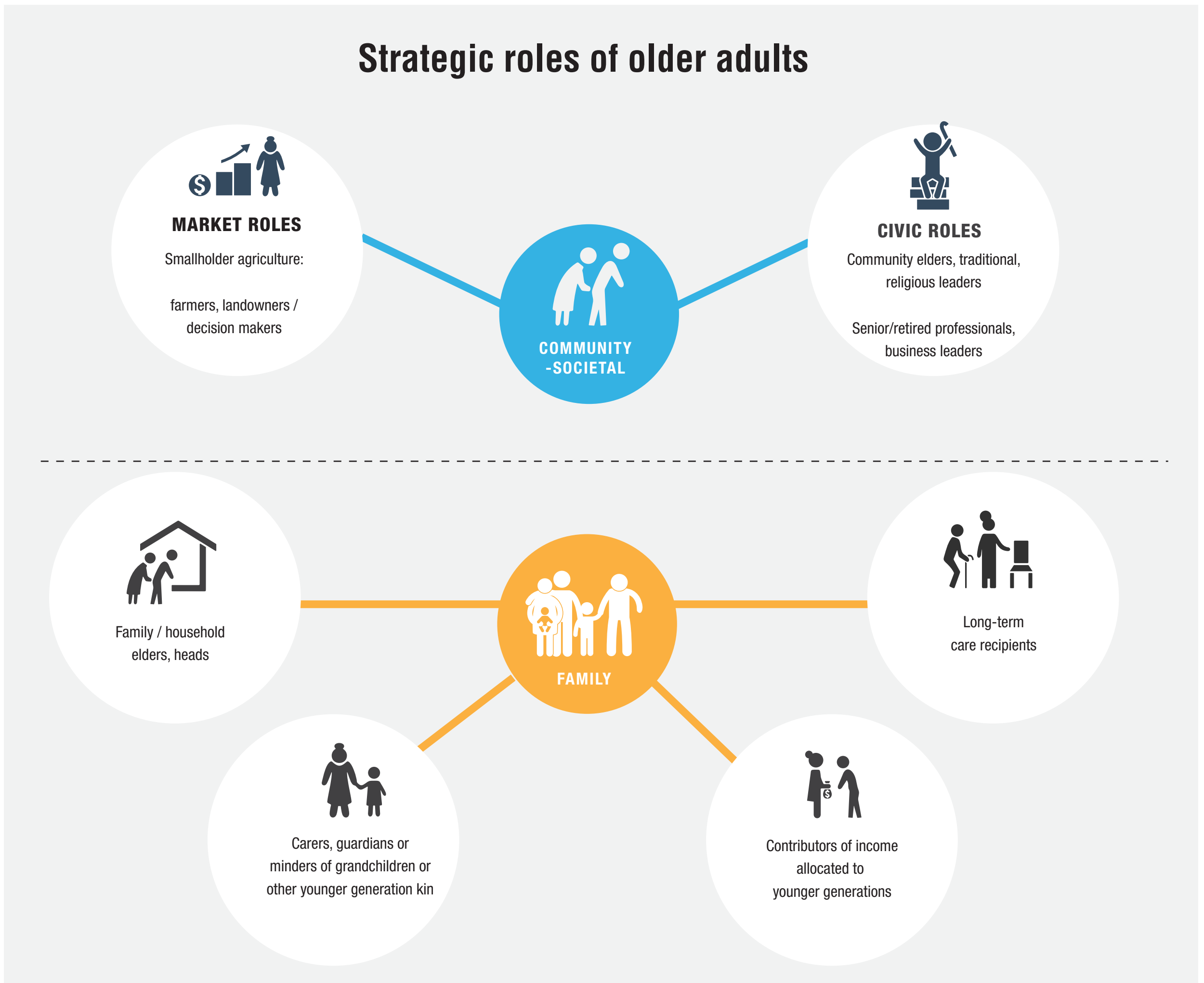
The core of our argument recognizes the particular roles that older adults play within African households, families, communities and societies – and posits that these roles influence the extent to which each of the four demographic dividend pillars can be constructed effectively, and in ways that are truly broad-based.

Our argument contends further that older adults' influences on the construction of the four pillars can be optimized through a set of key investments that would at the same enhance countries' positioning for a longer-term second demographic dividend. Our 'case' is predicated on eight specific propositions:

1

Older adults, by virtue of their generational position, seniority or simply advanced age, assume a spectrum of strategic roles at family- community or societal levels, depending on their gender, socio-economic position as well as locale (FIGURE 3). Such roles are more prominent at the bottom of the pyramid, the very segment of the population that demographic dividend pillar building efforts must target most.

FIGURE 3



2

In their roles, older adults directly influence the prospects, opportunities and exposures of younger generations through actions and decisions they take. There are seven building blocks for the pillars of the demographic dividend that are affected by these influences. (FIGURE 4)

3

The influences that older adults wield through their roles are of consequence for forging the demographic dividend pillar building blocks, in particular among presently underserved populations, at the base of the pyramid

4

The impacts of older people's influences may be positive or negative. Many adults, in older age, will be concerned with advancing the wellbeing of younger generations: a concept known as 'generativity', which aligns with traditional African understandings of a true elder. However, several barriers may impede the extent to which that impact is favorable. Chief among such barriers are a lack of education or knowledge; impaired physical or cognitive function, income poverty or absent mechanisms or structures for engagement.

DD building blocks and older people's influence



SOUND EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Older carers, guardians or child-minders influence what nutrition, emotional security and stimulation small children receive as they grow --- and, thus, what foundation for healthy brain development and fruitful lives they acquire.



CONDUCTIVE GENDER NORMS; ENHANCED ACCESS TO SCHOOLING, HEALTH (INCLUDING SRH) SERVICES

In their roles as family or community elders or religious leaders, older adults shape the interpretation and application of social mores, norms and customs in relation to, for example, gender roles and sexuality. As guardians or de facto breadwinners they allocate resources for schooling or health service fees. These influences can determine the access that young men and women have to education and sexual and reproductive health care; as well as their pathways to marriage or other domestic roles.



REMOVING BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S WORKFORCE ENTRY

The time and capacity African women can devote to economic activities is constrained by their responsibilities at home. Older adults influence the extent of these functions in multiple ways. As child-minders they free mothers' time for paid work or enterprise. In the absence of organized care services, those no longer able to live without the assistance of others typically depend on long-term care from younger female relatives – whose opportunities to participate in the workforce are, consequently, curtailed.



EXPANDED SKILLS TRAINING

The accumulated experience, life and technical skills of senior professionals or business leaders can represent a resource that can enhance the capabilities of younger people in- or out of education, training or work.



ENHANCED MECHANISMS FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

As traditional or religious leaders older adults shape processes of justice, conflict resolution and governance within and between communities, which can influence levels of stability as well as young people's opportunities for meaningful political participation.



TRANSFORMATION OF SMALLHOLDER AGRICULTURE

As land owners, older adults influence practices, technologies and ultimate levels of crop production as well as allocation of acreage for cultivation by young people and others.

5

Targeted investments to reduce such barriers coupled with a fuller understanding of later life generativity in Africa would help to maximize the positive and mitigate the negative influences of older adults on the building of the four demographic dividend pillars. Critical investments that countries should consider are; the creation of platforms for intergenerational mentoring and exchange; the active inclusion of older adults as change agents for building the four demographic dividend pillars; an expansion of adult, lifelong education opportunities; an orientation of health systems to better respond to the needs of older persons; an extension of social protection for older adults; and a development of long-term care systems that support family carers- while at the same time offering expanded opportunities for youth employment and enterprise as part of a care economy. (FIGURE 5)

6

Such investments would not only enhance efforts to achieve a first demographic dividend. They would also better position countries to reap a longer-term second dividend, by laying foundations for the very systems and institutions that future cohorts of older people – today's young – will need to remain healthy and 'productive' in their own old age.

7

The policy architecture and commitments to support such investments are already in place. They are captured in the AU's aging frameworks as well as in broader development strategies that African countries have embraced, such as the AU Agenda 2063 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. New approaches will need to be forged for some investments, but for others, promising models already exist and could be built upon.

8

More evidence to ensure that the suggested investments are embraced, and translated into effective practice is needed, in parallel with targeted stakeholder engagement to galvanize an Africa-wide debate on the case for harnessing older populations as part of national strategies to achieve a demographic dividend. A case, in other words, for the opportunity that an integration of aging and youth-focused development agendas in Africa promises.

FIGURE 5

Investments to harness older adults influence



The creation of platforms for intergenerational mentoring and exchange



The active inclusion of older adults as change agents for building the four demographic dividend pillars



an expansion of adult, lifelong education opportunities



an orientation of health systems to better respond to the needs of older persons



an extension of social protection for older adults



and a development of long-term care systems that support family carers- while at the same time offering expanded opportunities for youth employment and enterprise as part of a care economy.