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VIEWPOINT



Fostering political leadership for the demographic dividend in Africa: relevant cultural values

Chimaraoke O. Izugbara , Tizta Tilahun  and Hilda Owii 

ABSTRACT

A foremost challenge to the realisation of the accelerated economic growth of the demographic dividend in Africa remains the commitment of the region's political leadership to creating the enabling contexts to maximise the potential of its youthful population. This viewpoint considers three critical African cultural mores – the reverence-for-posterity norm; leader-as-community-proxy culture; and the elder tradition – that offer unique levers for fostering political leadership for the demographic dividend in Africa. Strategies for successfully tapping these cultural traditions require further research.

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Introduction

While debate on the link between population growth and economic development has raged for decades, attention has only recently swung to the development implications of population age structure – the distribution of a population across different age groups (Bloom, Canning, and Sevilla 2003). The available evidence indicates that it is the age structure of a population, rather than merely its size, that has the greatest impact on economic development. Development is more sluggish in modern societies where the non-working age share of the population outstrips the productive age segment; a realisation that has intensified the need to maximise the potential of current generations of young people by supporting their effective transition into highly skilled and productive persons (Lee and Mason 2006; Moreland and Madsen 2017). According to the United Nations (2015), the current figure of 1.8 billion 10- to 24 year olds in the world is expected to reach nearly 3 billion by 2070. The developing world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, will drive much of the growth in the global youth population. By 2050, not only will Africa have the largest number of working-age persons (Figure 1), one out of every three young people in the world will also be African (Figure 2). The population of under 18 year olds in Africa will increase by two thirds to almost 1 billion from 2015 to 2050, and Africa will become home to almost half the world's children by 2100.

The current and future large proportion of young people in Africa offers the continent a window of opportunity for realising what has been described as the demographic dividend:

“the economic growth potential that results from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population (14 and younger, and 65 and older)”. (UNFPA 2014)

However, translating the optimism about Africa's youthful population into development reality has not been without complications (Bloom et al. 2007; Canning, Raja, and Yazbeck 2015).

A foremost challenge to the realisation of the demographic dividend in Africa has been the commitment and slow pace of the region's political leadership in creating and pursuing truly transformative agendas, as well as enabling contexts, to maximise the potential and value of an expanding

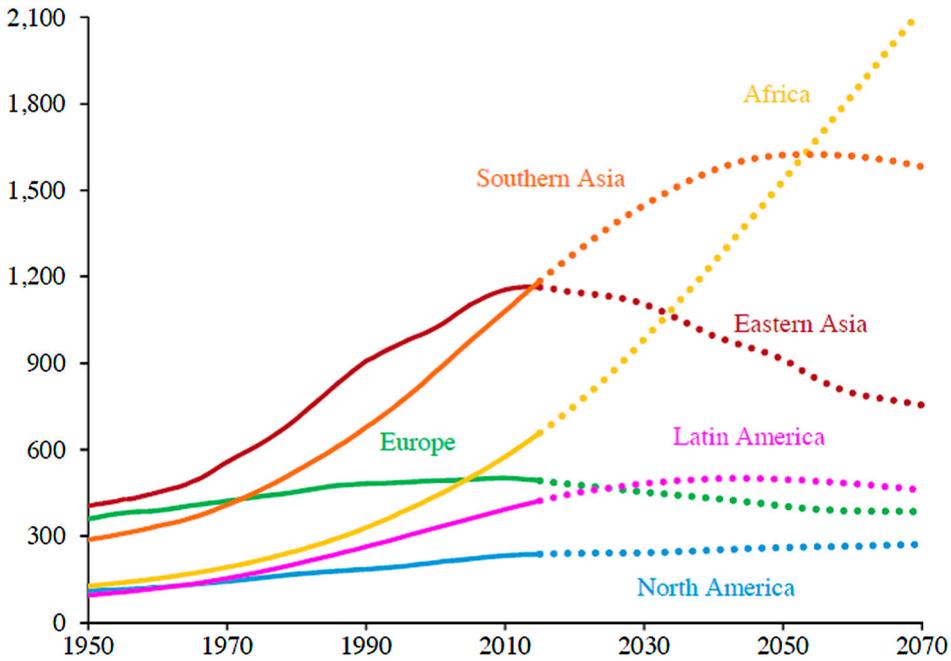


Figure 1. Actual and forecasted dependency ratios by region, 1950–2070. Source: Executive Office of the President of the United States (2016).

working-age population (Eastwood and Lipton 2011). While the accelerated economic growth of the demographic dividend remains a possibility for many African nations, the critical political and policy decisions needed to seize and harness it remain largely missing.

The importance of transformational leadership at this point in Africa’s history has been expressed in many recent key regional policy instruments, including the African Union Agenda 2063 and the African Common Position on Post 2015 Sustainable Development, both of which offer a guiding vision for realising an integrated, inclusive, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and being a dynamic force in the international arena. The Africa Union Agenda 2063 affirms the need for the continent and its people to effectively learn lessons from the past, build on the progress underway, and strategically exploit opportunities to ensure positive socio-economic transformation. While the degree of political change in Africa since the 1990s is remarkable, good leadership has yet

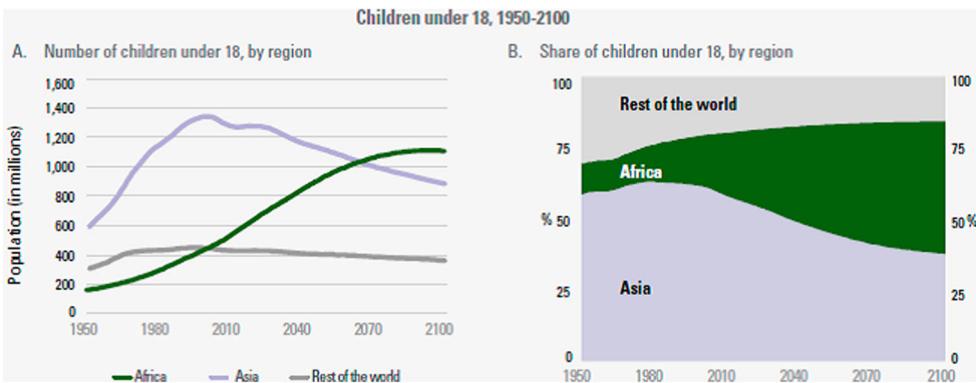


Figure 2. Actual and projected number of young people under age 18 in the world, 1950–2100. Source: UNICEF (2014).

to be firmly anchored in the region. As a result, pressures for change and for more effective leadership continue to build, particularly from youth demanding more concerted attention to their needs and aspirations for better quality representation, jobs, social services, and opportunities. These pressures show citizens' growing disillusionment with the slow pace of development in their countries as well as yearning for leaders to do more. Consideration of strategies for generating and sustaining Africa's political leadership for sustainable development is therefore urgently needed.

In this viewpoint, we expand on strategies for achieving Africa's demographic dividend by pointing to the neglected theme of culture and tradition. We suggest that local cultural values and mores can support the quest for political leadership for the demographic dividend in Africa. In what follows, we describe the demographic dividend; discuss recent issues related to the demographic dividend and development in Africa; and briefly explore the role of culture in development. Finally, we reflect on some key African mores for powering political leadership for a demographic dividend in the region.

What the demographic dividend is

'Demographic dividend' has burst upon the development scene as the organising concept and framework for theorising the critical implications of the age structure of a society for socio-economic progress (Bloom, Canning, and Sevilla 2003; Moreland and Madsen 2017). Among other sources, Drummond, Thakoor, and Yu (2014) recognise the demographic dividend to be the product of shifts from an age structure dominated by dependants to one with a greater proportion of working-age adults. A high proportion of relatively less productive segments of a population, particularly children and older people, often raises the need for societies to invest a high proportion of their scarce resources to care for, train, protect, and support them, which slows down economic growth. In contrast, as Lee and Mason (2006) claim, if most of a nation's population falls within the working ages, the superior productivity of this group can instigate a demographic dividend of economic growth. The combined effect of this large working-age population and health, family, labour, financial, and human capital policies can catalyse virtuous cycles of wealth creation (Figure 3).

But the demographic dividend is not unbounded, spontaneous, or definite. Societies benefit from it by investing deliberately and systematically in enabling its materialisation. Critical investments must go into building the capabilities and skills of emerging workers through quality education; ensuring the health, rights, and freedoms of people to realise their potential; and creating decent jobs, good governance, infrastructure, and economic climates that allow businesses to boom (Bloom et al. 2007; UNFPA 2014). The dividends are said to be delivered through increased labour supply, with the magnitude of this benefit contingent on the ability of the economy to absorb and productively employ extra workers rather than be a mere demographic gift; enlarged savings, resulting in the accumulation and re-investment of capital for higher productivity and more opportunities; formation of high-quality human capital, resulting from more investment in the education, health, and survival of children, leading to better health and educational outcomes; and growth in domestic demand due to rising GDP per capita and a diminishing dependency ratio (Bloom, Canning, and Sevilla 2003; Gribble and Bremner 2012; UNFPA 2014).

Africa and the demographic dividend

The demographic dividend is a key explanation for the development gap between many East Asian and African countries. Following rapid declines in fertility, during which the working-age population grew, relative to dependent children and adults, a boost in economic productivity was unleashed in East Asia (Bloom, Canning, and Sevilla 2003; Eastwood and Lipton 2012). However, this happened because the countries enjoyed strong political leadership and clear and focused development plans, and invested heavily in quality education and the preparation of youth for the world of work; attracted foreign investments; created opportunities for women to enter the labour force;

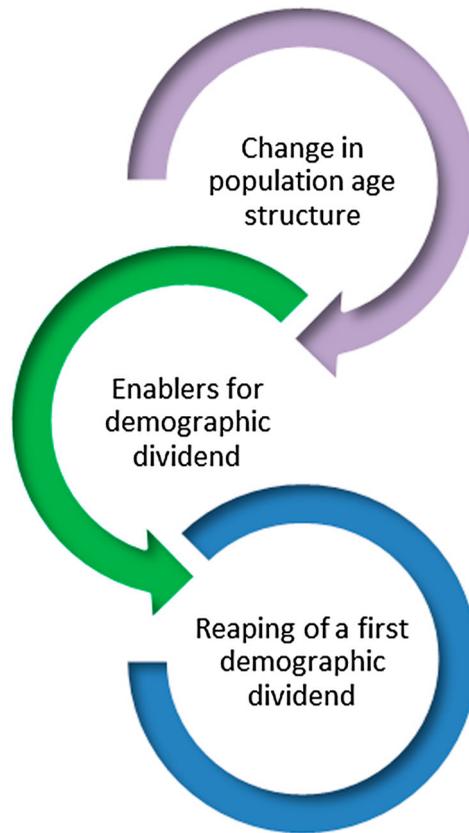


Figure 3. The demographic dividend process.
Source: Adapted from Gribble and Bremner (2012).

and expanded access to family planning. The combined effect of a youthful and productive labour force, reduced dependency, and declining fertility allowed these East Asian countries to expand infrastructure, support industrialisation, expand employment opportunities, and enjoy massive economic productivity and growth (Bloom, Canning, and Sevilla 2003; Drummond, Thakoor, and Yu 2014; Gribble and Bremner 2012; Moreland and Madsen 2017).

While there is no question about Africa's potential to harness the dividend, the region's progress in creating the preconditions for realising it, has been, at best, patchy (Bloom et al. 2007; Canning, Raja, and Yazbeck 2015; Drummond, Thakoor, and Yu 2014). A common refrain in the literature is that, as was the case in East Asia, the onus is on Africa's political leadership to establish and pursue policies that help the region seize the emerging opportunity. However, for many reasons, including the lack of commitment to the long-term development visioning and actions that allow the demographic dividend to thrive, African political leaders are yet to go beyond rhetoric and work earnestly to create the enabling environment for harnessing the demographic dividend. Of course, the demographic dividend has been acknowledged and ratified by the African Union as a critical tool for achieving a peaceful and prosperous Africa, transformed by its people. The demographic dividend was also the theme of the 2017 AU Summit which marshalled a framework for a continental initiative on the demographic dividend. Yet, all over the region, country-level efforts for the realisation of the demographic dividend remain largely unarticulated, at best rhetorical.

In this viewpoint, we highlight cultural mores as a potential resource for generating and sustaining African political leadership's commitment to the demographic dividend. Our focus is not so much on strategies for achieving a demographic dividend, but rather the cultural levers for promoting and

fostering African political leadership's commitment to it, and investments in realising it. We make the case for a demographic dividend in Africa by highlighting long-standing African cultural leadership values that could support the translation of emerging changes in demography into gains. Specifically, we build on current debates on culture and development to ask: what are some of the key African cultural values on which to anchor the ongoing quest for African political leadership for a demographic dividend?

Culture and development

Culture, defined by Tylor (1871) as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a human as a member of society, is at the heart of development. Boli and Thomas (1997) posit that development, broadly defined, is the process of building cultural capacities for existence and survival. They suggest that culture lies at the heart of every human aspiration and preference. It propels humankind to seek greater well-being and comfort, inspiring its creative abilities, desire for change, and innovative capacities. Fundamental human values such as self-confidence, dignity, and freedom find expression through culture. It is only when people are firmly rooted in their culture that they acquire the right measure of confidence and motivation for the innovative process of development. Further, UNESCO (2013) suggests that placing culture at the heart of development policy is an essential investment in the world's future and a pre-condition for strengthened development outcomes.

Fostering political leadership for the demographic dividend: relevant cultural values

Economists and demographers hold that Africa can fast-track its economic growth by exploiting its transforming population structure. Achieving this, among other things, entails clear visioning and determination on the part of the region's leaders. However, current economic models and other fiscal projections of how much wealthier and well-off the region will be in a few years – if the right investments are made today – do not appear to resonate well with African political leaders or inspire them sufficiently (Canning, Raja, and Yazbeck 2015). Several governments in the region have weak political opposition, lack strong political ideology, and experience declining international aid support – all of which hinder the pursuit of meaningful long-term development plans. Calls have therefore been made to go beyond current fanciful economic and fiscal models in holding African leaders accountable and inspiring them to work towards the conditions that enabled East Asian countries to harness a demographic dividend (Drummond, Thakoor, and Yu 2014). Can African cultural resources or traditional mores play a role in efforts to build African political leadership for the demographic dividend?

While recognising the limitations of over-generalising about or homogenising African cultures, we build on extant scholarly acknowledgements of the possibility of speaking of pan-African values in an age of modernity (Ayttey 2006; Mazrui 1994; Undie and Izugbara 2011). Our arguments draw on published ethnographies and histories of African cultures and societies; our own lived cultural experiences and knowledge as African social scientists; as well as data from guided dialogues and conversational interviews with several persons from east, central, southern, and eastern Africa.

This paper is, however, not a call for a revival of indigenous African leadership systems. Rather, it brings to the fore of contemporary consciousness some of the value orientations that underpinned the systems. Of course, we realise that culture is dynamic and that people everywhere in Africa, including youths, have varying understanding and interpretations of, as well as obedience to, local African cultural values. Yet, an appreciation that the current clamour for good leadership in Africa is not in dissonance with its cultural past can serve both leaders and citizens in the region. Understanding that citizens' continuing popular demand for better governance has a cultural basis is important for the region's political leaders. On the other hand, it is also critical that citizens realise

that their demand for good leadership is not merely a modern fad rooted in Western political thought. Further, knowledge of African cultural traditions of political leadership can be empowering for the region's current generation of young people as they look to become future political leaders. All these resonate with the African Youth Charter which calls for "*the education of young people directed, inter alia, to 'the preservation and strengthening of positive African morals, traditional values and cultures and the development of national and African identity and pride'*".

In what follows we initiate discussion on some cultural values that hold promise for motivating political leadership towards the realisation of the demographic dividend in Africa.

The most critical African value for motivating political leadership for the demographic dividend is perhaps the age-long cultural norm of *reverence for posterity*. Also termed "posteritism" by other writers (Ehrich 1901; Yablon 2011), this important value expresses the sacred regard which Africans have for the highest good of posterity. While Africans are noted for their deep respect for elders, their devotion to posterity and future progeny runs much deeper. An enduring cultural expectation in many of the region's communities is that the living owe a sense of deepest responsibility to posterity and have to consciously show deference to, invest in, and unremittingly acknowledge its (posterity's) interests. While the norm of reverence for posterity takes a variety of forms in Africa, it remains omnipresent. Besides the curse of posterity, which is dreaded all over Africa, it is a taboo in many of parts of the region to deliberately pass on errors, hardship, diseases, animosity, and crises to posterity. Elders among the Ngwa of Nigeria clearly demarcate land borders and mark historic and ritual sites so that posterity is not thrown into contestations, avoidable conflicts, and miseries. In precolonial Dahomey, extant generations had the sacred duty to fight all essential wars and settle all strategic disputes so that posterity was left unencumbered. The requirement that the current generation prioritise the prosperity of future generations is further expressed in African sayings and names. Ugandans say that "society is sustained on posterity, and not the aged"; the Sudanese, that "posterity is the child of everyone and should never lack"; and Ghanaians, that "we bequeath two things to posterity: roots to firmly grow and wings to soar". The sacred cultural concern for the highest good of posterity underlines such African names as *Ihubike* (posterity is strength); *Ubadinihu* (wealth is in posterity); *Nkeiruka* (posterity is the most critical), and *Olanrewaju* (the future is wealth, or wealth is moving forward).

Reverence for posterity undergirded many great precolonial African civilisations. Mansa Musa reportedly invested in building the largest university and library in precolonial Africa to secure knowledge and learning for posterity. Concern for the posterity of the Yoruba society motivated Moremi, the famed Yoruba superwoman, to yield to capture by Igbo warriors who terrorised her society. She would escape back to save Yorubaland after learning the secrets of the Igbo warriors. Amenhotep III (Egypt), Oba Ewuare the Great (Nigeria), and Osei Kofi Tutu (Ghana) were all reputed for their opposition to nonchalance for the interest of posterity. Africa's reverence for posterity presents an important cultural value for rousing the region's political leadership to its moral responsibility to bequeath posterity a superior and finer future of vast wealth and well-being by investing in the realisation of the demographic dividend.

A second cultural value with potential for kindling political leadership for the demographic dividend is Africa's *leader-as-community-proxy* tradition. Customarily, leadership in Africa entrusted officeholders with the weighty responsibility of becoming stand-ins for their communities. Every member of the society was fully and legally represented by the community headman or leader. Communities were sacred body-socials, for which leaders had a hallowed responsibility to work for, protect, and serve. Consequently, in many African societies, the name of the lineage or community is formally carried by the head or leader of that lineage. For instance, lineage heads among the Suku of Congo DRC are addressed as Suku and not by their personal names. A similar usage exists among several African societies, including the Ngwa of Nigeria. The oldest lineage member who is present in any situation can call himself by the name of his/her lineage and is so called by others (Kopytoff 1997). Africa's leader-as-community-proxy tradition places immense burden on authority holders and leaders to accord pre-eminence to citizens' interest, as exemplified in the Ethiopian maxim

that “leaders lose their reputations before they lose their kingdoms”; the Nigerian adage that “shepherds do not strike their sheep”; and the Ugandan saying that “being a leader is a garment borrowed from one’s lineage/community”. As in the past, the present-day Bukusu of Kenya expect leaders to be wise and able to fully represent their communities, a requirement also found among the Gabra and Borana (Kenya) who associate leadership with wisdom and stout knowledge of community needs (Wandibba 2003).

The leader-as-community-proxy norm placed the dignity of communities first and, in consequence, held leaders to a deep and unrelenting responsibility for societal welfare and happiness. Within this context, accountability and the well-being of communities became key goals of leaders. A common practice among African societies, lineages, and communities was to withdraw allegiance to headmen and leaders who ruled autocratically, did not defer to their communities and lineages’ aspirations, or were guilty of maladministration. Among the Yoruba, a king snubbed by his people was deemed rejected by the ancestors and gods. He was expected to commit suicide. Chiefs would start the process by boycotting the king’s palace, and if he stuck to his policies, his overthrow would be contrived, and even his suicide demanded or required (Ayittey 2006). Africa’s leader-as-community-proxy norm can be key in catalysing positive political leadership for nation-building; deepening and broadening opportunities for current and future generations; and the realisation of a better Africa. It remains a valuable traditional more for motivating African political leaders to work towards the realisation of the demographic dividend.

The third African cultural practice of value in the quest for political leadership on the demographic dividend is the *elder tradition* and its related *posterity leadership custom*. In Africa, elders enjoy a lot of respect and are expected to play critical roles in social organisation and nation-building. There is also a cultural expectation for leaders to leave lasting legacies for posterity. Mazrui (1994) noted the potential of the elder tradition in conflict prevention, containment, or resolution, exemplified in Canon Carr’s lead mediatory role in the peace process in Sudan in the 1970s and Desmond Tutu’s subsequent involvement there. During the 2007–08 post-election crisis in Kenya, African elders including Desmond Tutu, Kenneth Kaunda, John Kufuor, Graça Machel, and Kofi Annan served as mediators or negotiators, ultimately bringing the aggrieved parties to a truce. Other examples exist all over the region, such as the recent negotiations that peacefully ended Jammeh’s protracted rule in Gambia.

Africa still has reputable and respectable elders. These elders hold immense potential in efforts to motivate and work with current political leaderships in Africa to commit to and invest in the realisation of the demographic dividend. Where these elders are themselves the frontline political leaders, strategies are needed to tap their sacred cultural duty as legacy creators in firm pursuit of the demographic dividend.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the fast pace of modernisation and continuing global concern about some atrocious African cultural practices, the region bustles with many cultural values that can be the basis for progress and development. As the window of opportunity for the demographic dividend remains open for Africa, the cultural values identified here offer unique levers for motivating political leaderships in the region to facilitate the achievement of its first demographic dividend. Research is, however, needed to find ways to convert these cultural traditions into concrete interventions for galvanising the region’s political leadership to translate the optimism about its youthful population into reality.

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